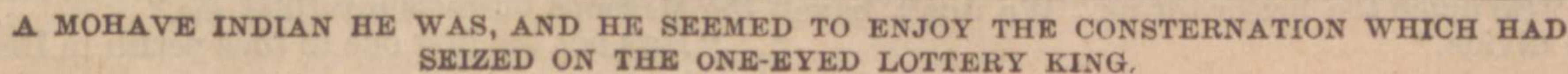


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THE traveler who halts on a certain elevated plateau in Southern Arizona overlooks a region which at first sight captivates the eye. The mountain range sloping gradually joins a snug little valley through which a river winds like a stream of molten silver. Here and there are clumps of mesquite and other trees, while in the very center of the scene, like the setting of a ring, appears a town of no mean proportions. Beyond the valley, especially if it be high noon and the sun burning hot, something glitters like a great sheet of polished steel. It is the sand of the Arizona desert, and the few

plants there seem to dry up in the fierce heat that prevails.

But the traveler on the *mesa* sees mainly the grouped roofs of the town, and if San Satano be his destination, he hastens forward again, glad to end his journey.

In a little while he finds himself in a town which looks half Mexican. It is not far from the borders of our sister Republic, and the *sombreros*, gay sashes and dark faces with sparkling black eyes that greet him on every side, incline him toward the question: Am I still in Arizona?

It is past noon and the sun still beats with all his fervor upon the roofs of San Satano.

The people found in the streets, which are neither wide nor clean, care nothing for the broiling rays of the sun. There are loungers with long cigars in their mouths on the Plaza where the principal drink-shops and the one hotel are, and wherever more than ten men are seen together there is a strange commingling of Americans, Mexicans and Indians.

San Satano is cosmopolitan like all the towns on the Southwest border. It might be called a "free city" in the fullest sense of the term, for it makes its own laws, pays no taxes to any governments and answers to no high authority for anything that happens there.

A short distance from the Plaza on the principal street leading from it, stood a frame building of respectable dimensions. The front of it ran up squarely above the point of the roof, showing a good deal of unplanned weatherboarding above the door and windows. In the middle of this space, and directly over the door, was roughly painted in indescribable colors one word:

"JUAREZ."

The cramped windows that flanked the narrow door, which was always found open, were filled with pieces of mineral rock, Indian arrows, human scalps, rattlesnake skins—the latter for medicinal uses, and other bric-a-brac of the border.

At first sight the visitor would have pronounced the place a curiosity-shop, but it was more than that.

Behind the counter, which ran from the right front of the room to the dark end, always stood the presiding genius of the den.

A wiry little man not over five feet four, with no surplus flesh beneath the yellowish skin that covered his bones, with long black hair that shook on his shoulders when he moved his head, and with but one eye, a black, blinking, glittering optic.

He wore an open jacket over a soft gray shirt which had a pocket under his left arm. Above that pocket always protruded the smooth handle of a dagger, and the quickness with which its owner could bring it into the sunlight bordered on the marvelous.

Such was Juarez, the One-Eyed, as he was called. He did not claim to be in the slightest sense an American. He was a human riddle with several kinds of blood in his veins, but with only one desire in his head—to make money by getting the best of his fellow-man.

On the day which we have chosen for the opening of our realistic narrative, the One-Eyed was alone in his shop. Alone but not idle.

He stood behind his counter with hundreds of little cards before him. These were numbered in red ink, and looked, for all the world, like lottery tickets. They were nothing less.

Juarez ran the "San Satano Wheel of Fortune," a gift enterprise which robbed rich and poor alike. It was not solely the product of his brain, as the reader shall presently see, but he was the man on the surface, the manipulator, ticket maker, seller and judge.

Throughout Southern Arizona and among the towns of Sonora and Mexico, posters in American and Spanish called attention to the coolest swindle of the day. People seemed to go wild over the San Satano Wheel of Fortune, and Juarez had no difficulty in disposing of his tickets.

Money appeared to be plenty, the mines of Arizona and Sonora promised to enrich everybody, and people of all degrees seemed crazy to hold at least one of Juarez's five-dollar "assurances."

His capital prizes went to men who circulated through the country, making proclamation of their success, and no one suspected that but a tithe of the money thus paid out remained long from Juarez, for the lucky winners were but stool-pigeons to bring the birds to the net.

Juarez assorted his tickets in the sunlight that streamed in at the open door.

It was the day before the "Grand Drawing."

On the counter before him stood the alleged Wheel of Fortune. It was mounted in a position so that it could be turned easily, and looked like a closed cheese-box, though it was gaudily painted.

In the top of the wheel was a door which received the duplicate numbers and from which the tickets were drawn by a blindfolded boy named Pedro.

The drawing—there had been two before the one about to come off—took place on the Plaza, on a raised platform which had already been

placed in position, and the One-Eyed was getting ready for the event.

He was going over the numbers with a greedy twinkle in his one orb when a figure darkened the doorway.

As a shadow fell across the counter, the One-Eyed looked up and saw his visitor shut the door as he came forward.

"They're coming in," announced this individual, who was tall, well dressed and strikingly handsome.

He was the owner of the Arizona Queen Mine, and throughout the country was known as Colonel Centipede.

As he spoke he leaned over the counter and looked at Juarez with a pleased smile.

"We shall have a crowd," replied the little man, his solitary eye getting a new twinkle. "The shops will do a big business, and San Satano will wear its best clothes. I'm completely sold out, you see; every ticket gone."

Colonel Centipede looked at the tickets on the counter.

"He hasn't come yet, eh, Juarez?" he asked. The One-Eyed shook his head.

"Do you look for him?"

"Yes."

"If he should not come, what?"

"The Wheel of Fortune will turn just the same."

"And Number 2727 will come out first?"

"It will."

"You haven't placed it in the wheel yet?"

"No. I do that to-morrow. Pedro knows where to find it."

Juarez laughed at the end of his sentence.

"It is here," he went on, taking one of the coupons from among the hundreds before him.

"This is the ticket that takes the capital prize to-morrow. It is held by Sonora Si, who has promised to turn up at the proper time. Something may detain him somewhere, but the prize will be held for him," and here Juarez grinned again.

Colonel Centipede turned his head at this moment, for the door had opened.

"Have you any tickets left, Captain Juarez?" asked a harsh voice.

The speaker was a rough-looking fellow, with his pantaloons tucked into cowhide boots. He gave forth many signs of a fresh arrival, and, in truth, he had not been twenty minutes in San Satano.

Juarez shook his head in answer.

"Haven't you got one?" persisted the disappointed man. "I've come fifty mile ter take a hand in yer Wheel o' Fortune, an' I don't like ter be fooled. Not a single ticket left, captain? I wouldn't mind givin' a ten for one."

The chance of getting ten dollars in exchange for nothing was too much for Juarez.

"Wait till I look," said he, and he turned to a rough little cabinet, which he began to ransack with immoderate zest.

Suddenly his hand swooped down upon a ticket left over from the last drawing.

"Here's one that I promised to save for a man," he went on, looking at his customer.

"He was to be here by noon to-day—"

"Well, it's past that time now."

"I know that, but—"

"I'll stand between you an' the man if he comes," broke in the stranger.

Juarez tore off the coupon which—another scheme of his—bore the date of the drawing, and passed the ticket over the counter. The stranger looked at the number, handed Juarez a ten-dollar gold-piece and tramped out.

"I thought you had sold out," remarked Colonel Centipede.

"So I had."

"What if the first purchaser of that ticket should turn up?"

"He won't. It was never sold before. I had it left over."

"Juarez, you're a trump!" exclaimed Colonel Centipede. "A trump that catches ten dollars when the chance comes, eh?"

The two men laughed together.

After awhile the colonel went away, leaving the lottery shark alone in his den.

On the Plaza, where the descending sun was throwing long shadows, were groups of men, Mexicans, Indians, American toughs and what not—in all a wild, motley crowd.

Every one was interested in the turn of the wheel, some to the extent of a dozen tickets, others happy in the possession of but one.

Centipede crossed the Plaza and entered a well-to-do house a few yards beyond.

He had barely crossed the step when he found himself face to face with a man who had been waiting for him.

"Well, what is the lucky number for to-morrow?" asked the visitor.

"Twenty-seven, twenty-seven," was the response.

"Who holds it?"

"Sonora Si. He hasn't come in yet—"

"No, and he never will."

"Why not?"

"He is dead!"

The colonel looked at the speaker for a moment, and then laughed.

"So much the better for us. We won't have to divide!"

CHAPTER II.

2727.

ALL through that night the patrons of the One-Eyed poured into San Satano. They came by every mode of conveyance and from every direction, young, old, red, yellow, white, male and female.

In consequence of this influx, the saloons of the town did a thriving business, and the front porch that ran along the whole length of the Double Dagger Hotel continually held a hard crowd.

Juarez was here, there and everywhere. Whenever he showed himself he was besieged by an excited crowd, mostly women ticket-holders, who besought him to see that fortune smiled this time on them.

At midnight he was closeted with Centipede and the man who had brought information of Sonora Si's fate.

This person was a typical sport of that remote border. His blonde hair curled on his broad shoulders. He was expensively dressed, and the fifty-dollar sombrero that sat back on his head revealed a forehead of ample dimensions.

"So, Si is dead, you say?" queried the One-Eyed to this man in Colonel Centipede's best room.

"I've told the colonel so."

"Did you see him pass in his checks?"

"I did not."

"Came up later, eh?" ventured Juarez.

"Yes, a month afterward."

The One-Eyed gave Centipede a quick look.

"How did it happen?" turning to the informant again.

"I don't know."

"Didn't they tell you?"

"Didn't *who* tell me?" snapped the man, bending slightly toward Juarez.

The one orb flashed with a malignant gleam, and its owner was about to retort in like humor when the new-comer went on:

"I found Sonora Si in Black Vulture Valley, among the mesquite," said he. "He had been playing Mazeppa for somebody, for the cords still held his body to the well picked bones of the horse. How did I know it was Si, eh? In the first place, by the silver braid that clung to one well-preserved sleeve, and, secondly, by the absence of three teeth from the upper jaw—he lost 'em in the Balderbrino affair with Soft Hand Monte and his friends."

Juarez nodded.

"Did you search the ground where Sonora Si lay?" the One-Eyed questioned.

"Yes."

"Did you find the leather purse he carried beneath his laced locket?"

"Not there."

"But you did find it?"

"I did."

"Where?"

"A mile from where I ran across Si. My horse nearly stepped on it."

An expression of the utmost anxiety settled on Juarez's face, while his little body went forward until it had almost left the chair.

"What was in it?" he asked.

The man on the witness-stand smiled at this evident eagerness.

"Nothing worth carrying off," he replied.

"No ticket in the San Satano Wheel of Fortune?"

"I didn't see any, but the purse had lain out in the weather so long that its contents had been reduced to pulp, and the leather itself was rotten."

Juarez let slip a breath of relief.

"I think we're safe, eh, Juarez?" put in Centipede.

"Perfectly safe!" assured the lottery king, brightening up as he rubbed his yellow hands.

"Captain Burt brings the best news I've heard in a year. We won't have to pay Sonora Si the promised percentage. He carried the ticket in the purse which was found in the grass, and it is lost. We don't care who tied Si to the horse, nor why, do we, colonel?"

"Of course not!" responded Centipede. "We can call out 2727 to-morrow with perfect safety."

The little yellow hands, bad things to have at one's throat—were unctuously rubbed again.

"You know the rules of the 'San Satano Wheel of Fortune,' gentlemen," pursued Juarez.

"If the holder of a prize ticket does not present himself within twenty days after the drawing, he forfeits all right to the money. I think we shall wait longer than that before we see Sonora Si present his ticket. Now, gentlemen, everything is in readiness. I shall go home and get sleep enough to make me as bright as a dollar for the event. It is a cool twenty thousand dollars in our pockets. Ah! the San Satano eagle is in the upper skies again!" And emptying at a single gulp a glass of wine that stood on the table, Juarez took his evil little eye out of the room.

"Do you really think the pocketbook contained papers?" eagerly questioned the colonel when the One-Eyed was gone.

"I think it did."

"That is good! Sonora Si was to have had five hundred for his share. We get it now. But the Mazeppa business mystifies me."

"He's not the first one to thus perish in Black

Vulture Valley," answered Burt. "They do lots of cool and cruel tricks down there, and I thought it best to make no inquiry after Si because I wanted to be on hand to-morrow."

"Certainly. The crowd will be here. It is nearly all here now."

"And Juarez will play the same old game with his accustomed coolness!"

"A thousand to ten that he will! That little devil with but one eye in his head hasn't an equal in cunning. He's provided for every one of his prizes, and knows beforehand just where each one is going to drop. Juarez is worth his weight in diamonds."

Meantime the night was wearing away.

As it was warm—in the heart of the Arizona summer—hundreds had fallen asleep in the open air between the cabins, while others, the men, principally, were making night hideous in the saloons and gaming dens.

Through the early morning a few more ticket holders in the San Satano lottery came into town. These were the rear guard of those already on hand.

Three o'clock in the afternoon was the hour set for the drawing.

By that time the sun would be behind a mountain spur and the Plaza would be cast in shadow.

Colonel Centipede, by reason of his prominence, had always been accorded the position of overseer of the drawing. Those from a distance did not know that he was the partner of Juarez, the One-Eyed, and that into his pockets, already well-lined with gold, dropped nearly two thirds of the profits of the scheme.

At half-past two, two men carried the lottery wheel to the raised platform in the middle of the Plaza.

Juarez in his half brigandish suit and with his hat tilted back on his head, mounted the dais and called Colonel Centipede from the crowd.

The nabob of San Satano left the side of Captain Burt and took his accustomed station.

The Square had never been so packed before. Of course not all of Juarez's patrons were there, but the most of them were.

The solitary eye wandered over the assemblage and twinkled with satisfaction.

"Captain Burt's words are confirmed," said the One-Eyed to Centipede in low tones. "Sonora Si was to have stood at a certain place, and he is not there. The person who occupies it is a tall stranger, who came in some time last night. I'll call Pablo up and get him ready."

At sound of Juarez's voice, a dark-faced and stout boy of seventeen, disengaged himself from the crowd at the foot of the platform and mounted the steps.

Juarez introduced the lad to the crowd as the person who, blindfolded, drew the tickets from the wheel, and then opened the door in the wheel itself, turning it upside down and shaking it well.

This had always proved satisfactory to the crowd, which did not know that the capital prize ticket and four others were adroitly pasted inside the wheel, and where Pablo knew where to find them.

Having gone thus far, Juarez blindfolded Pablo, and Colonel Centipede, with some show of ceremony, took the numbers from a tin box and dumped the whole into the wheel.

It now lacked five minutes of three.

Every living soul in San Satano was on the Plaza. In nearly every hand was at least one ticket, and some laps held a dozen with the red numbers paraded where they could be easily seen. Overhead floated a score of dark objects, clearly outlined against the brazen sky, and some who saw them wondered upon what or whom the vultures of the Southern Desert would next swoop.

"Time up!" called out Colonel Centipede, closing the watch he had held open for five minutes.

Juarez started forward like a Jack thrown from the box.

Taking the parti-colored sash from his waist, he encircled his head three times and called the already breathless crowd "to order."

"Ladies and gentlemen," said he, "the hour has arrived for the third smiling of the goddess upon you. Colonel Centipede has deposited the coupons of all tickets sold in the wheel before you. I have the happiness to state that not one ticket has been left over, such being the confidence of the people in the management of the 'San Satano Wheel of Fortune.'"

Colonel Centipede at this juncture glanced at Captain Burt. There was a smile on that rascal's face.

"Pablo, the Child of Fortune—the dispenser of her favors—will now draw from the wheel the first lucky ticket which will entitle the holder to ten thousand dollars," continued Juarez, stepping back.

Putting out his hand he brought the boy forward while Centipede gave the wheel a rapid turn.

For several seconds it went round and round, its showy colors blending into one, and when it stopped Juarez opened the door in the upper side.

"Pablo, my boy, the open door of Fortune is

before you. Put down your hand and fill some heart with joy!"

The boy obeyed.

For half a second his right hand was invisible, being in the depths of the wheel, and when it was withdrawn it held a ticket.

"Read out the number, colonel!" exclaimed Juarez with a bow.

Colonel Centipede took the bit of paper from the boy's hand and after studying it for a moment, read off in a clear voice:

"Twenty-seven hundred and twenty-seven!"

Instantly thousands of eyes consulted as many tickets. One could have heard a leaf fall.

"Who holds the prize number?" shouted Juarez, a smile lurking at the corners of his mouth.

"I do!" answered a clear voice at his left, and a thrill darted through the little man's frame when he wheeled in that direction. "I am the man who holds 2727. I am the Tall Mesquite from San Bardo!"

Already every eye was riveted on the more than six foot, broad-shouldered and bronze man who held a piece of paper between thumb and finger. A Mohave Indian he was, and he seemed to enjoy the consternation which had seized on the One-Eyed Lottery King.

"Go on with your scheme. I'm here when you want me!" continued the Tall Mesquite.

Juarez turned to Colonel Centipede with cold sweat on his temples.

"In heaven's name, who is that man?" whispered the One-Eyed.

"The devil's own, I reckon. But, play the game out. Captain Burt is watching the man from San Bardo with his hand on his gun."

CHAPTER III.

THE WINNER FROM SAN BARDOL

A THUNDERBOLT dropping from the cloudless sky overhead would not have electrified the three partners of the San Satano Wheel of Fortune more than did the words of the Tall Mesquite from the South.

San Bardo was not unknown to Juarez and his friends. The town of that name was the capital of a Sonora silver district, peopled by men with cool heads, and silken but dangerous hands.

The lottery king did not remember having sold a ticket to any one from San Bardo, and he was quite confident that No. 2727 had been taken by Sonora Si, for a purpose already plain to the reader.

This being the case, there was but one solution to the mystery. The Tall Mesquite was one of those who had transformed Sonora Si into a Mazeppa, and sent him to a terrible fate in Black Vulture Valley.

The drawing proceeded, but not with triumphant glee on the part of Juarez.

The winner of the capital prize stood erect, with his dark eyes, fine figure and swarthy face a target for the envious. Blonde Burt, the third partner, eyed him like a hawk, and Colonel Centipede and Juarez paid him a good deal of attention.

The minor prizes dropped here and there, and were permitted to be carried off without collusion, but the larger ones were drawn by human stool-pigeons who would receive a meager per cent. from Juarez, and keep their mouths shut.

A more gigantic and bare-faced swindle than the San Satano Wheel of Fortune never had an existence.

"I'm glad it's over," said Juarez to Colonel Centipede when Pablo had taken the last lucky number from the wheel. "Now comes the tug of war. What has become of that cool rascal from San Bardo. By Jove! he's left his place!"

"Here I am, captain," interrupted a voice at the little man's elbow, and the next moment Juarez was staring into the unmistakable face of an Indian!

He had noticed from his place on the platform by the wheel, that the man from San Bardo had Indian features, but now all doubt was removed. He was looking at a genuine Mohave, tall, straight as an arrow and keen-eyed, like the eagle.

"Where do you cash your tickets?" continued the Tall Mesquite, secretly enjoying Juarez's surprise, as a twinkle deep in his black eyes showed.

"Are you certain there's no mistake?" stammered Juarez.

"There can't be," returned the Indian. "I've got the number that was called first."

"I don't recollect selling to you."

"Of course you don't, Captain Juarez," and the Mohave smiled. "I didn't buy my ticket here. I got it of the original purchaser, one Sonora Si."

Three men started at the mention of this name, Captain Burt, Colonel Centipede and the One-Eyed.

"I guess every thing's straight," rejoined the latter with a quick glance at his partners. "We want to get rid of the small fry first so as to clear the town of the trash. We will cash your prize to-night!"

"At what hour?" coolly asked the Indian.

"At ten."

"Where?"

"At my store."

The Mohave stepped back and withdrew.

The eyes of the three followed him some distance; indeed Juarez did not lose sight of him until his tall figure disappeared beyond the porch of the Double Dagger Hotel.

"What do you think?" exclaimed the One-Eyed, five minutes later in the quietude of Colonel Centipede's cabinet.

"We've got to master that Indian!"

"Of course. He admits that he got the ticket of Sonora Si."

"Why should he deny it? He is no spring chicken, that red-skin ain't. He knows that you are not likely to forget selling a ticket with such a peculiar number to a man like Sonora Si. People have been known to gamble our tickets off."

"But Si would not."

"No," answered Centipede promptly. "The red-skin from San Bardo, which means that he is from somewhere else, took the ticket from either a dead or a helpless man. What say you Burt?"

Blonde Burt brought one of his dangerous hands down on the table rattling the three wine glasses together.

"That band against a dollar that the Injun was in the plot—the plot against Sonora Si, I mean!" exclaimed Burt. "Couldn't you see that he's a polished red—no common lout like the average run o' Injuns?"

"He's got a burning eye and long silk fingers. I saw that," remarked Juarez.

"The man is dangerous. He is playing a cool game for ten thousand dollars. I never saw a cooler. One man against the San Satano Wheel of Fortune! By Jupiter! that takes sand."

Both Juarez and Blonde Burt confirmed the colonel's observation.

"You fixed the paying hour grandly," continued the colonel. "By ten o'clock the monte ranches will be full and the unlucky ones will have left town. You need not fear that the Tall Mesquite will follow their example before that time."

"Of course not," grinned Juarez.

"He'll be there to the very minute with No. 2727. But, we don't have to let him drag the prize back to the tables of San Bardo."

"He shall not!" declared the Blonde. "Injun or no Injun he fails!"

At the same time the tall form of the red-skin from the South was leaning against one of the rough pillars of the Double Dagger's porch waiting calmly for the hour set by Juarez.

The sun had gone down and the shadows of approaching night were falling across the Plaza.

He saw Juarez cross one corner of the Square, with a troop of half crazy people at his heels, and after awhile the crowd came back, making the short twilight hideous with shouts of every kind.

Juarez had cashed all lucky tickets on his counter, and the holders of blanks were the one's that had inaugurated the pandemonium.

The Indian watched the wild crowd with something like a smile.

All at once the figure of a young girl passed before him. She seemed to have disengaged herself from the mob, and her route carried her within a few feet of the Mohave.

In an instant his eyes caught sight of her and followed her form.

The girl was not past seventeen, with a slight figure full of grace and suppleness. She had a beautiful face, in which were set a pair of liquid eyes of wondrous depth and brightness—in all, a strange being to inhabit a town like San Satano.

She had not disappeared when the Indian dropped from the porch and followed.

The girl did not look back to see if she had attracted any one's attention, but kept on to the last house toward the mountains on the north.

At the door she paused a moment and looked over her shoulder.

In a minute, as it were, night had swooped down upon San Satano, blotting out the last ray of lingering light and casting everything in heavy shadow.

It may have been that the girl saw the tall figure of the Indian a few feet away. If she did she did not start nor dart into the cabin in affright.

The Mohave was at the door almost before the fair inmate could discard the light mantilla she had worn.

She heard his step, soft as it was, and, in a moment, her hand was on the latch.

As she opened the door the red-skin from San Bardo stepped in!

A light burned on the table in the middle of the room. It revealed objects but indistinctly, and the girl did not increase the flame.

"Thank Heaven! you have come!" she cried, springing toward the Indian and catching his hands.

He looked down into her face without a change of expression.

"Did you think I would not?" he asked.

"No, not that. But it seemed a long time to wait. You came with the lucky ticket, too!"

For the first time the Mohave smiled.

"They did not expect this," said he.

The girl drew off and stared at him.
"What! didn't you bargain with them?" she queried.

"No."
"I don't understand. They did not dispute the ticket—"

"They could not, child," rejoined the Indian. "Captain Juarez dared not go back on his own game. Ah! you don't know where I got the ticket. I did not kill any one for it, though its original purchaser lies a dead Mazeppa in the heart of Black Vulture Valley."

"Sonora Si?"
"Yes, child. You knew, then, that he held the prize ticket of the grand fraud for which San Satano is famous?"

"I knew it," smiled the girl.
"The One-Eyed nearly fell out of his boots when I held up the number, which he did not expect to see here," continued the Mohave. "Colonel Centipede also fell back a step, and Captain Burt, with a little Satan in his eye, laid his hand on his gun. I saw it all, Meda. The three rascals weren't looking for the Tall Mesquite from San Bardo, but he came, all the same."

"They won't let you get away with the prize-money!" exclaimed Meda, with the pallor of fear on her face.

"They won't, eh?" laughed the Indian. "I'm playing for bigger game than the chief prize in the San Satano bubble; but, I'll take the cash to-night, by the way. But, what about the noises, Meda? Do you hear them yet?"

"They have strangely ceased," replied the girl.

"When did they stop?"

"Three days ago."

The Mohave gave a slight start.

"Have you listened much since?" he questioned.

"I have listened often."

The Tall Mesquite looked toward a corner of the room in which stood a plain bedstead.

"I believe I'll try my ears," said he, coming back to the girl.

Without more ado Meda went to the door and looked out, then she came back and saw the Mohave move the bed from the wall.

Having done this, he opened a trap in the floor and lowered his body into the opening below. When he had disappeared, Meda pushed the bed back and returned to the door.

"My fate is in the hands of that Indian," she murmured. "I pray that no harm may befall him, but he is playing the coolest hand ever played in the wild Southwest. And against the maddest men that ever plotted together! They won't let him walk off with the prize-money. Even now they have their heads together—Colonel Centipede, Blonde Burt and Juarez—the three rapacious rogues of San Satano. I knew the Indian would come, but not as the holder of Sonora Si's ticket. Did he have to play a hand of this sort? Must he rouse the devil natures of the banded three? He knows best, and I can trust no one but the Indian detective."

Meda had barely given vent to the last word when a footstep went past the door.

Her quick ears caught the sound and the next moment she opened the portal noiselessly and looked out.

A figure was slouching off toward the Plaza, creeping, as it were, through the meager starlight.

"Already on his track!" ejaculated Meda. "The net of the three partners is spread for the Mohave Ferret!" And she sprung back to the bed as the dark face of the Tall Mesquite came out from beneath it.

In a moment the Indian was on his feet, and before Meda could frame a sentence, he said:

"I heard no sound at all. But, never mind, child. The game can be won without him. I am in the scheme to win, and heaven and earth can't baffle Silk Hand, the Mohave Ferret!"

CHAPTER IV.

A TALE OF TWO CRIMES.

THE man from San Bardo, then, was Silk Hand, the Ferret.

When he had spoken, he gently disengaged himself from the girl's touch and moved toward the door.

"A spy has just slouched past the shanty," said Meda.

"Hal a spy?" cried the Indian. "Did you see him, child?"

"I did?"

"And knew him?"

"Yes."

"Was it the yellow tiger with one eye?"

"No, it was Blonde Burt."

"The soft-hand sport of the Satano bubble!" smiled the Mohave. "Which way did he go?"

"Toward the Plaza."

"Back to headquarters with his report," continued Silk Hand.

"Ere this he has delivered it."

"What! Silk Hand, do you think he discovered that you are here?"

"Why not? Blonde Burt has sharp eyes that let nothing escape them. I would like to know if the Tall Mesquite from San Bardo hasn't a right to visit the Angel of Arizona."

"But they will suspect!" exclaimed the girl.
"My mission, eh?" was the quick response.
"No, the wily three of San Satano will not suspicion that. The coil is tightening, Meda. Link by link I have welded the chain, now in the mountains, now on the burning deserts, and in the sun-shot towns."

"What have you discovered, Silk Hand?"
There was breathless eagerness in Meda's voice, and it carried her over to where the Indian stood, his tall figure proudly erect at the door.

"What have I discovered?" he echoed, looking down into her face. "It is some time before I cash my ticket at Captain Juarez's counter—"

"You are determined to present it, then?" broke in the girl.

"Yes. It is one of the planned plays of the game."

The girl made no reply, but watched the Mohave intently.

"Listen, child," he resumed. "Ten years ago two men escaped from different prisons at the same time. They were far apart—one within sight of the Pacific, the other under the flag of the Mexican Republic. Hundreds of people who knew of the escape of one did not hear of the other. The convict in Mexico fled to the bush, and was hunted for days by the bloodhounds of that Government. His crime was so heinous that if he had been caught, his captors would have killed him on the spot. Death would have been his fate at his trial, but for the stubbornness of one of the men who sat on the jury. Well, this convict baffled his hunters; he disappeared in a manner that mystified the whole gang. To this day there is a standing reward—not for his capture, Mexico doesn't want to feed him again—but for his head. But Jose Paquina, *alias* the Heart-Eater, has never been handed over in any way to the avengers of blood."

Meda wondered, when the red narrator paused, if he had found the trail of the chapparral scoundrel; but his look told her nothing, and she let him proceed without a question.

"The convict who escaped in San Francisco at the moment when Jose Paquina crawled from his tunnel was a twenty-years' man," pursued Silk Hand. "He killed a hermit of the Shasta Mountains—a man who was a mystery to his closest friends. He was tracked by a vendetta and picked up at last in Mexico. Thinking that he would get justice, he was taken back to California where money and some of the toughest swearing ever heard in any court saved him from the noose. The men who had followed him step by step would have demolished the prison and swung him from one of its beams, but they lacked the power to do so. You can imagine their indignation when they heard that Marked Monte had escaped. In an incredibly short time a small but prosperous camp in the gold hills was abandoned. Its thirty men swore a tremendous oath ere they applied the torch to the cabins, that they would devote the remainder of their lives to the recapture of the branded convict, Marked Monte."

"He had disappeared so completely that almost before the ruins of the camp had ceased to burn, the thirty trailers were nearly ready to confess themselves beaten. Here and there they picked up a promised thread of the mystery; but it always proved false. The convict of California was as completely lost as the convict of Mexico—Jose Paquina. With my own eyes, Meda, within the last three years, I have seen scrawled in the hot sand of a Sonora desert, and where lay the bleached bones of some unfortunate, these awful words:

"The last of the Thirty Avengers."
"SAM SORRELL!"

"What! did Marked Monte turn on his hunters and cut them off one by one?" exclaimed Meda, who had not let a syllable of the Indian's narrative escape her.

Silk Hand smiled in return.

"Do you think so, child?" he queried.

"I cannot think otherwise from the terrible sequel to that man-hunt."

"Those thirty men were found in different places, one by one," the Mohave went on. "The prospector came upon them in the mountains, and the traveler across the plains found them in his path. They died on the *mesas* and in the valleys, and across the forehead of each, when time or the vultures had not denuded the bones of flesh, gaped a crimson cross."

"What a monster!" cried the girl, drawing back. "But why do you talk about the two convicts in the same breath, Silk Hand?"

Again that peculiar smile which she had noticed before on the dark face of the Indian ferret appeared in the same place.

"Ah! I thought you would want to know!" said he. "Well, Meda, strange as it may seem, the lives of those two men came together at a certain point."

"What! the lives of Jose Paquina and Marked Monte?"

"Yes, girl."

"And you have discovered this, Silk Hand? Ah! what a tireless trailer you are!"

He did not appear to notice the compliment,

but continued seriously and like a person in haste to get through.

"Stranger things than this have happened, Meda. The trail through the Mexican chaparral and the track of Marked Monte have crossed more than once within the past ten years. But they seldom run together. The same influence that helped the 'Frisco convict to liberty gave the Mexican bandit the tools with which he carved his underground route to freedom. A woman did it, girl—one of your own sex."

Meda flushed with indignation.

"I know that the hand of Jezebel is ever at work," said she. "And I blush to think that the fingers of woman helped the two convicts to liberty."

"They did, and the thirty men who fell here and there before the merciless hand of some one—shall we not say Marked Monte's?—owe their death, in part, to her. But I must close the story, Meda. Juarez, the One-Eyed, is waiting for me behind his counter, and I want to make the yellow rascal poorer by ten thousand dollars."

"Beware, Silk Hand! You may find more than Juarez behind the counter of his den."

"It is not unlikely," answered the Mohave, opening the door.

"After the cashing of the ticket, what?" asked Meda.

"I shall go away."

She seemed to give a slight start.

"Back to your trail?" she inquired.

"Yes."

"What shall I do?"

"Keep word and watch in San Satano. Somebody is coming, Meda. You will know whom the moment you set eyes on the person."

"Shall I continue to listen for the sounds I have heard in the earth beneath this cabin?"

"I fear they have ceased forever," replied the Indian, and then he continued quickly:

"Where is the mouth of the Arizona Queen, child?"

"The main shaft is in a direct line from the Plaza, west."

"Is it guarded?"

"Not unless a guard has been recently established."

"And Captain Juarez's mine—where is it?"

"Oh he abandoned it some time ago."

"It did not pay?"

"No, the One-Eyed said it was eating him up. The shaft has been partially closed. It lies to the south of the Arizona Queen in a direct line, and within a few feet of a large tree."

Silk Hand said no more but laid one hand softly on Meda's shoulder while he looked into her eyes, studying her very thoughts as it seemed with his dark and penetrating orbs.

All at once he withdrew his hand, stepped across the threshold and was gone.

Ten feet away in the starlight he halted and turned toward the shanty.

"Tangled trails and tangled lives!" parted his lips. "Though Meda has never seen *her*, she will recall my words when *she* comes."

The next moment he was walking toward the Plaza, his arrow-like figure bent slightly forward in eagerness and his eyes in a glitter.

Perhaps it was the telling of the story of the two convicts that thus animated them. Or Silk Hand, the Red Ferret, might have been thinking of the fresh and beautiful girl he had just left and a hope—Pshaw! he was an Indian—a scarlet detective on a terrible trail, with a life devoted to vengeance—and she, a white girl thrown among the banded toughs of San Satano!

Silk Hand the Mohave turned into a by-street and soon passed into another, a little broader.

Not far away stood the best known building in San Satano—the swindling shop of Juarez, the One-Eyed.

Silk Hand bent his steps toward the place.

In a few seconds he saw a light beyond the half-open door. The proprietor of the den had put up his shutters, as if to prevent some of the disappointed ticket-holders who lingered in town drinking the vile liquor of the dens, from robbing the windows.

As the Indian detective drew nearer he caught sight of Juarez behind his counter counting a lot of tickets by the light of his candle.

The light set directly in front of the One-Eyed threw a grotesque shadow on the objects behind him.

Silk Hand stopped within a few feet of the door and studied the odd tableau a moment, then, as a smile came to his swarthy face, he pushed the portal open and strode in.

At that very moment a curious little clock on the shelf behind Juarez struck off ten.

The winner of the grand prize was punctual to the very minute of the appointment.

Juarez heard the step though it was not heavy on his greasy floor, and looked up.

"Ah!" he cried with a grin. "You have come to rob me?"

The Indian made no reply until he reached the counter.

"I've come for what the ticket drew, Captain Juarez," he rejoined. "That is not robbery unless—"

"Stand back and die!" rung out a voice at the

end of the counter, and the Red Ferret wheeled in that direction and saw himself covered by two cocked Winchesters in the hands of masked men!

CHAPTER V.

WHAT FOLLOWED THE DROP.

At the stern command Juarez dropped one of his hands and pushed it glibly beneath the counter.

At the same time he kept his eyes fixed on the Indian detective, wondering, as could be seen by their glitter, what Silk Hand would do.

The dark masks behind the leveled Winchester fell over the chins of the wearers, thus effectually concealing their faces. Their hands were incased in gloves, but the fingers that touched the triggers were not thus hidden.

Ay, what would the man from San Bardo do? His life hung on a thread, and the statues behind the rifles sent forth no sign of mercy.

"What do you want, Indian?" asked one of the executioners.

"My money," answered Silk Hand.

A sarcastic laugh was the response he got.

"Your money, eh? There is none here for you."

"No," put in Juarez, with a promptness which left no doubts of a conspiracy of three. "We pay only to the original holders of the tickets."

"Of course, Juarez," said the right-hand mask. "If you paid to every Tom, Dick and Harry, a fellow would have to guard his ticket day and night. The Indian acknowledges that he is not the first purchaser."

"Sonora Si was," rejoined the One-Eyed. "We must hold the capital prize till he comes, if he shows up within the limit understood by all ticket-holders."

If the eyes behind the masks had watched Silk Hand closely they must have seen his left foot glide toward the bottom of the counter.

His body did not seem to follow it, but nevertheless it bent slightly in that direction.

"We can't pay it, sir—not to you," resumed the lottery king, prompted to deliver this ultimatum by the menace of the rifles.

The following second a hand darted over the candle and caught Juarez before he could withdraw his body. The One-Eyed uttered a cry of terror as the red fingers closed, and in a flash he was jerked out of the space between counter and wall, and whisked over the former before he could catch his breath!

He nearly upset his candle, which event, had it occurred, might have precipitated a serious catastrophe, with a blazing lottery shop in the foreground. At any rate, the revolver which he already clutched dropped from his paralyzed hand, and he found himself writhing in front of the rifles, and in the iron grip of the Tall Mesquite from San Bardo.

"Be still, cat, or I'll drop you to the floor dead!" whispered the Indian, and then he looked over his prize at the thunderstruck desperadoes who had covered him.

"A game more than two can play at!" he went on, but addressing the twin masks. "If you want to save the capital prize at the expense of the skin of the boss sharp of Arizona, blaze away!"

Juarez twisted more than ever, but his supremest efforts did not loosen the grip that seemed without a rival.

"For God's sake, let him off!" whined the yellow rogue. "He is sinking his fingers to my bones, and I'd sooner lose the money than have 'em there."

"You would, eh?" replied one of the masks.

"A thousand times sooner," repeated Juarez.

"We'd rather not!" was the retort.

The One-Eyed turned a white and beseeching face upon the unknown rifles.

It was as he had said; the fingers of Silk Hand appeared to have buried themselves, in part, in his flesh, and he dreaded their final power. What if the man from San Bardo would transfer his grip to his throat?

The bare thought of such an event sent an icy chill through the yellow scoundrel's blood.

Meantime, the Indian was taking no further hand in the affair beyond holding Juarez in front of the rifles in such a manner as to shield the vital part of his own body.

He seemed content to let his victim make terms for him with the enemy.

"If the Indian doesn't drop you, Juarez, we shall shoot through you and stop the cashing of Sonora Si's ticket!" suddenly said the spokesman of the two.

A shriek of agony arose from Juarez, the One-Eyed.

"Don't!—don't, for Heaven's sake, Colonel Centipede!"

The yellow dog of San Satano checked himself while the Indian smiled grimly.

Juarez had committed the serious blunder of naming one of the masks; but the mistake was not in the nature of a surprise to the red-skin.

He had doubtless guessed the identity of both, for like Colonel Centipede and Blonde Burt, they were fine specimens of athletic manhood.

"Choke the dog and drop him, Indian," were the words that answered Juarez's blunder.

"No! throw him behind the counter, and stand

where you are till he counts out every dollar of the prize."

For a moment Silk Hand appeared on the eve of obeying the suggestion, one which Juarez would have carried out without much coaxing now; but he suddenly walked back toward the door.

"The prize will be taken with interest in the future," said he.

"You hear that, Juarez? With interest, the red-skin from San Bardo says. Every dollar shall come from your individual pocket."

The swindler of Arizona set free a groan.

Another step brought Silk Hand's heel in contact with the door. The night was at his back, but he still faced the motionless figures at the end of the den.

"Have your money ready when I come back," he said, to Juarez, though loud enough for the masks to hear. "In order to save future trouble you want to revise your rules. Pay to the holder, not to the purchaser. Some of your tickets are liable to have strange adventures. The one I hold could tell a story that would curdle your blood. Good-night, Juarez! I'll make your name the laughing stock of the white and yellow sports of San Bardo."

Juarez was dropped from the Indian's hands with a suddenness that took his breath.

He fell to the floor in a heap and with a thud which seemed to crush every bone in his body.

Myriads of stars danced before his eyes, and before the most agile could dance themselves away, he was jerked up and shaken until his teeth chattered.

"You had to let the cat out of the bag?" cried a loud voice that made Juarez's head ring.

The yellow lottery sharp opened his eyes and found before him the blazing face of Colonel Centipede, the nabob of San Satano.

A mask of black no longer covered it, and beyond it, approving everything the colonel said and did, was the unmasked figure of Blonde Burt.

Little Juarez begged in a whine to be released. Indeed, his mention of Colonel Centipede's name was a slip of the tongue, made when his life was in peril, with ten red fingers deep in his flesh.

"But—we—saved—the—money—anyhow!" gasped the One-Eyed, between shakes.

"Saved it, you say? You heard what he said?"

"About coming back after it?"

"Certainly."

"But we'll be on the lookout for him. The next time the twister from San Bardo puts in an appearance, we'll proceed to make a red seraph of him."

"No, Juarez, you will do nothing of the kind," was the rejoinder. "He couldn't have reached you if you had drawn back to the wall when we covered him. You might have known that he would make a shield out of you."

"I can't look into the future, colonel. But, then, you didn't have to hold a confab, before you shot. I thought he'd tumble toward the door, dead, without any palaver; but—"

"There!" broke in Colonel Centipede, as he released the lottery king who fell back exhausted. "The Tall Mesquite is walking off chuckling to himself though he didn't get to cash ticket No. 2727. With a whole skin, too, Juarez of San Satano! Take his advice and revise your rules. And add a new one to this effect: 'The proprietor of the Wheel of Fortune will betray his partners on every occasion.'"

"Never!" cried Juarez.

Blonde Burt and Colonel Centipede burst into a laugh.

It was still irritating Juarez's nerves when a step was heard and all three looked toward the door.

As Colonel Centipede had interposed his body between the threshold and the candle, the door was cast in dense shadow.

But the boss of San Satano stepped aside, and Juarez uttered a startling cry.

"It is the same voice!" came from the front of the shop, and as the little money shark of Arizona seemed to turn into a statue of terror at the counter, a woman rushed forward.

In a twinkling she had Juarez in both hands, but she almost immediately released him and fell back.

"I said I would when I found him, and I will!" she cried, lifting a cowhide whip. "I'll cut his face to the bone for his last cute play in Dos Lopedos!"

The terrified Juarez threw up his hands with another cry, but they were jerked down, and the whip would have descended with the strength of an infuriated Amazon behind it, if Colonel Centipede had not grasped the uplifted arm.

"Don't cut him!" exclaimed the Southwest nabob. "An Indian has just dropped him to the floor half dead."

"An Indian?" echoed the woman who was a striking beauty, still young, and the possessor of a magnificent figure.

"An imp in red!" grated Juarez.

"Hush! Not a word out of you, viper!" commanded the unknown Jezebel. "What was the red-skin like?"

"He was tall, robust, dark and strong," replied the colonel.

"A Mohave?"

"I think a Mohave," answered Blonde Burt.

"Then he is the most dangerous enemy we have!"

The two Americans stared at the woman.

"What, gentlemen! don't you know me?" she cried, snatching up the candle and holding it before her face.

Blonde Burt and Colonel Centipede fell back a step.

"The Queen of the Desert!" they cried.

"Yes, gentlemen; Cactus Clara!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE MAN UNDERGROUND.

THE woman thus named still held the whip which, through Colonel Centipede's intervention, had been spared the task of crimsoning itself with Juarez's blood. As for the yellow lottery-sharp, he had stepped still further back and was gazing at her with pallor on his face and fear in his eyes.

"Let us get out of here," continued Cactus Clara. "The presence of yon villain is contamination. I don't want to breathe the same air he does." And she gave Juarez a look that did not please him.

At any rate the Amazon of the desert was going away, and that was something.

He ventured no remonstrance, and for fear that she would not go soon enough, he told Colonel Centipede with a glance to comply with her suggestion.

A minute afterward the One-Eyed was the sole occupant of his little shop.

"Shaken up by an Indian, and clutched by Cactus Clara! I think this ought to last me a year!" exclaimed Juarez when he no longer heard the voices of the three walking toward Colonel Centipede's. "The last person one expects generally turns up. By Jove! I felt that whip—I know what it is—cutting through my face even though she did not get to strike. She mentioned Dos Lopedos, didn't she? Just as if I have no recollection of the past! She seems to know the Indian who held the prize ticket. Is she on his trail? She's always hunting some one, that lightning-eyed Queen of the Desert is."

Juarez was more than glad that the woman was gone.

He went back to his accustomed place behind the counter and resumed the duties interrupted by Silk Hand's visit.

But first he locked the door, probably through fear that the woman and the whip would glide back and take him unawares.

He seemed to have no fears of the Tall Mesquite's return. He said he would come back at some future time and collect the capital prize, and his manner intimated that Juarez would have plenty of time to prepare for his reception.

Meantime, the three—Colonel Centipede, Blonde Burt and Cactus Clara—had reached the nabob's house and were seated in the parlor.

The woman's cheeks were still flushed.

"Yes, that Indian is too dangerous to be at large just now," said she, looking at her companions.

"What is he after?" queried Centipede.

"More than we want him to have," laughed Cactus Clara. "Do I puzzle you, gentlemen? Ten years ago two prison cells were suddenly emptied. One had for its tenant a yellow rascal who deserved the halter a thousand times; the other—"

She paused and fixed her glowing eyes on Colonel Centipede.

"We will take the rest unsaid," he broke in.

"But come back to this red-skin, Queen Clara."

"I will," smiled the woman. "He came to town as the Tall Mesquite from San Bardo, you say?"

"He did."

"That is one of his last names, assumed for the purpose of playing the game he did not get to complete, for the prize ticket was not cashed. He may come back for the stakes, but it will not do to wait for him. Gentlemen, the Indian is Silk Hand the famous ferret of the Pacific Slope. He has gone to the end of more trails and straightened more tangles than any living detective red or white. I have tried to keep pace with him—that is, I have followed him through Lower Sonora and over part of old Mexico watching for an opportunity, not to slash his face as I intended to slash Juarez's but to give him something like this!"

Cactus Clara seemed to draw from her sleeve as she concluded a dangerous-looking dagger with a point like a needle and a handle of black ivory.

"Did he elude you like the fox that doubles?" asked Blonde Burt eying the dagger on the table. "Well, if an instrument like that was after me, I don't know but I would double, too," and he ended with a chuckle which met no responsive smile from the Queen of the Desert.

"I did not know that Silk Hand was here else I would have put in an appearance sooner," she went on. "What did he do?"

Colonel Centipede related the story of the lottery drawing, how for the first time they saw the well-clad Indian waiting for the moment when he should electrify them with the announcement that he and not Sonora Si held the

winning ticket, and how he had been compelled to leave San Satano without the stakes of fortune's game.

To all of this Cactus Clara listened with interest.

"He had an interview with Meda; I am almost sure of it," said Blonde Burt.

"Who is Meda?" asked the woman quickly.

"Meda," answered Colonel Centipede, taking the words from Blonde Burt's mouth, "Meda, by the way, you have never seen."

"Is she young?"

"Not past seventeen."

"Why is she here?"

The two men smiled in unison at the query.

"Women have to live somewhere," rejoined the woman, showing her pearly teeth for a moment. "I'm here, there and everywhere. But you haven't answered me. Who is Meda?"

"She is the child of mystery."

"Ha! When did she come to San Satano?"

"Five years ago."

"Alone?"

"No. I brought her in."

Cactus Clara fixed her luminous eyes on Colonel Centipede.

"Where did you find her?"

"On the plains."

"Adrift?"

The Queen of the Desert bent forward in her eagerness to catch the nabob's answers, and Blonde Burt, leaning back in his chair with his body one half in shadow, made a study of her face.

"The colonel must not go too far with this thing," thought he, his gaze wandering to the dagger on the cloth. "I happen to know something about the woman he's dealing with. When she is jealous her fingers get red at the tips, and they're changing color now. Beware, colonel. You're playing for somebody besides yourself just now."

"Yes," said the San Satano nabob in answer to Cactus Clara's last question. "Meda was adrift when I found her."

"Tell me."

Colonel Centipede happened to catch Blonde Burt's eye at this moment. It was full of advice to be cautious.

"I was alone at the time, and midway between San Satano and the Devil's Arrow, out on the plain with the moon above me and no landmark in sight. Almost suddenly I came across a wagon in the short grass. It lay on one side and the cover had been burned off. Near it lay three horses, dead, and under the wagon itself the body of a man with his face disfigured beyond recognition. Bound to one of the wheels I saw a young girl. She was unconscious. She did not look more than twelve. Suffering had pinched her pretty features and hunger had played a hand in the game. Of course I cut her loose and revived her. When she came to I found that there was no getting any thing sensible out of her. She seemed to have forgotten the cause of her terrible situation. She knew nothing of the tragedy of the plains. The past was a blank from which she could extract no ray of satisfaction.

"I brought her to Santano. She called herself Meda, and 'Meda' she has been ever since. There can be no mistake as to the intentions of the devils who marooned her on the desert. With fiendishness unparalleled they had left her to the vultures, and it is probable that the next day they would have finished her. Such is the story of Meda," concluded Colonel Centipede with another sidelong glance at the blonde sport who seemed to approve of the narrative.

"Is she very pretty?" questioned Cactus Clara.

"We think so," smiled the colonel.

"The Indian went to see her, did he?" she asked turning suddenly to Blonde Burt.

"I think he did."

"Did you see them together?"

"No."

"Guesswork, eh?"

"Partly so."

It was evident that Blonde Burt was trying to creep out of a very unpleasant situation.

"I'll take a look at your *protegee* to-morrow, colonel," resumed Cactus Clara to Centipede. "Of course you examined the outfit on the plain for a clew to Meda's identity?"

"I went back, buried the man and burned horses and wagon."

"And found nothing?"

"Nothing."

A smile passed over the face of Blonde Burt in shadow.

"The colonel is a shrewd one!" he laughed to himself. "He knows when to shut his information box and padlock it."

Cactus Clara picked up the dagger and put it away.

"What about the prisoner?" she queried with a good deal of anxiety.

"Oh, we had almost forgotten him!" exclaimed Colonel Centipede.

"I had him in my mind all the time. How does he like his cage by this time?"

"I don't know. Would you like to see?"

"If you will go with me."

Colonel Centipede arose and poured out a glass of wine which he drained.

"Won't you go along, Burt?" he asked, setting down the glass.

"Is it necessary that I should, colonel?"

"No—"

"Then I'll stay behind."

In a little while the nabob of San Satano and the woman from the desert were going down the street which soon lost itself among the shadows at the edge of the town.

"Do you guard him any more?" questioned Cactus Clara at the last shanty.

"No. It isn't necessary."

"He isn't violent, then?"

"I should say not," laughed Centipede. "You will not call him so when you see him."

Ten minutes later the two were threading an underground passage. A taper that flickered ghostly burned in Colonel Centipede's hand, and Cactus Clara followed at his heels.

They left one corridor for another, and some were so narrow that they could barely squeeze their way along.

"We are under San Satano now," said the colonel over his shoulder. "Almost directly above us is Meda's house. Ah! here we are—at the door!"

"The door!" echoed the woman behind him.

Colonel Centipede took from his pocket a large key and thrust it into a key-hole which he found with his taper.

A squeak, a pull and the door was open.

The Arizona nabob led the way into the cavernous opening thus discovered.

"Aha! I knew we would find him here!" he exclaimed.

"Where is he?" responded Clara.

"Yonder. Take the torch and look."

The Queen of the Desert took the light and followed the colonel's directing finger.

She took four steps and stopped.

"You are right. He is here," came back to the nabob.

At the same time Cactus Clara stooped and stared at the figure at her feet.

It was the figure of a man—a young man as she could see despite the starved look and the dark skin drawn tightly over the bones.

The body lay on its back with both hands shut on the ground as if still in the death agony.

It was a terrible picture!

Colonel Centipede standing off with a triumphant twinkle in his eyes watched her intently.

Suddenly he saw her rise and pass the light in front of the wall above the body.

"What are you looking for?" asked Centipede.

"For a record if he left one," was the reply.

"Then look no further, for we didn't allow him any tools."

The next moment the Desert Queen halted before the nabob.

"You can be merciless when you try, can't you?" she cried.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RECORD OF THE DEAD.

"MERCILESS?" laughed the boss of San Satano. "Isn't that a tiger's nature, Queen Clara? Did you want him to have all the conveniences he wanted?" and he glanced toward the shriveled body lying near the wall.

"No; my commands have been carried out—to the letter, terribly so. But are you sure that he left no record behind?"

"Oh, we can soon settle that," was the response.

Colonel Centipede took the light from the woman's hand and went forward.

"The walls of this place are very smooth, you see," he went on. "They weren't made so exactly for him, but I intended the cell for a prison."

"Wait!" cried Cactus Clara, bending suddenly over the dead body. "There is something in one of his hands!"

"In his hands, you say?" And Centipede turned aside with the torch and stooped at Clara's elbow.

It took all her strength to unclasp the closed hand, and then she but partially succeeded.

A glittering object fell out to be snatched up by Colonel Centipede and held to the light.

"He had ingenuity, sure enough!" said the nabob, glancing up at the breathless woman. "This object is a blade hammered from several buttons attached to his clothes. It must have taken him days to make it, and in the dark, too!"

"Now we can look for a record," cried the Desert Queen, drawing back. "He did not make that instrument with a hope of cutting his way out."

"No, no. He was as safe here as a toad in a rock."

Colonel Centipede moved the light along the wall before them, now high and now close to the ground.

"There it is!" suddenly exclaimed the woman. "There are scratchings on the wall. And they are letters, too!"

It did not take Centipede long to see the writing which Cactus Clara's sharp eyes had been the first to discover.

He leaned forward in his eagerness to decipher

it and the woman was not one whit less interested.

Side by side they stood with the torch above Colonel Centipede's head, and both at the same time read the terrible sentences scratched on the stone.

Thus they ran:

"I am Arthur Malabar, walled up at the command of my sister—known as Cactus Clara!"

"Colonel Centipede and his minions obey her as slaves obey their master!"

"I have been here for three years as I calculate time in this dungeon. Now they withhold food and drink, and the end is nigh!"

"The secret which they expected to wrench from me I take into the unseen world."

"I would whisper it to an avenger if he would come, but I shall perish undiscovered."

"Still in the avenging day of the Infinite and by a hand I shall never see, the blow will be struck, and the vultures of the Southwest border will pay dearly for this demon work!"

"The trailer lives! The avenger comes! The hand that deals God's blow will be soft, but it will slay!"

"I am content to die with this to allay the agonies of the last dread hour!"

"Vengeance is mine," saith the Lord. 'I will repay!'"

It took Colonel Centipede and his companion some time to get to the end of the dead youth's scrawl, but they did so at the same moment, and mechanically looked into each other's face.

"That must not stand there," said Cactus Clara, pointing toward the tell-tale stone. "I don't care if you put a thousand locks on your door. They obliterated, you know, every record left by the Man in the Iron Mask and—"

"It shall be done," broke in Colonel Centipede. "I would as soon think of proclaiming that writing on the Plaza of San Satano as of leaving it where it is."

"When will you remove it?"

"Within a few hours."

"See that you do," rejoined Cactus Clara.

"I knew his nature well enough to suspect that he would not die without leaving a record behind if he could. Come, let us go out. He has left no further writing. When you come back to destroy what we have just read, you may examine the other walls."

The following moment the light went toward the door and in a little while it shut harshly and was locked.

Neither Centipede nor the Desert Queen saw two glittering eyes on the ledge of the stone corridor above their heads.

It was dark—very dark—beyond the light thrown out by the torch, and the head that held the brilliant eyes would have been hard to see for it was covered with black hair and the skin of the face was dark.

When the conspirators had vanished around a turn in the passage a figure dropped from the shelf and landed at the door of the underground cell.

If Colonel Centipede could have returned with his torch he would have discovered the Indian who had escaped from the muzzles of two Winchester—Silk Hand, the detective.

It was useless for the red-skin to think of breaking into the prisoner's tomb. Colonel Centipede carried the key, and the only way to pass the threshold was with it.

He laid his hand on the heavy door, which seemed solid iron, though it was not, and felt the hinges in the Stygian darkness that surrounded him.

"The secret is beyond this door," murmured Silk Hand. "The woman who has followed me—the heartless, though beautiful vulture of the deserts—has come up with Silk Hand at last. I am nearer than she thinks, and some of the links which I have added to my chain would make her start. Ah! my white viper; the hand of the Indian is disentangling the skein, and he will have all the threads into one by and by. The birds seem to be flocking to one common object like the vultures of the plains. Where the carrion is there will the birds be. And when the feast is at its height, the hand of the avenger won't be far away!"

The Indian detective drew back and left the spot to silence.

He passed down the very corridors threaded by Colonel Centipede and Cactus Clara, and at length reached the outside world through the mouth of the mine.

Already the two who had preceded him had disappeared and Silk Hand stood for a moment among the rubbish by which he was surrounded.

Here and there in the space before him he saw the lights of San Satano, and a few strides would have put him among them.

"Meda was right in her fears concerning the underground prisoner," said the Indian ere he turned away. "He will never again reward her listening. The secret cell of the Arizona Queen holds the dead, and it shuts in a secret which some day will be mine. What became of the youth who three years ago rode from Dos Lopeo with Cactus Clara? She came back, but he did not. I have solved a part of the mystery. The boy lies beyond the iron door of Colonel Centipede's bonanza. Who is he? Ah! that is the question as yet unanswered, but my

head against a dollar that the walls of his tomb can tell!"

Silk Hand was about to leave the spot when a jet of flame sprung up among the cabins and dens of San Satano.

In a moment his gaze became fixed upon it, and while he looked it increased in volume, as if it were fed with oil.

"Fires like that in this country have a lawless starting-point!" cried the Red Ferret, springing forward to get a nearer view. "The hand of the fire fiend is over yonder. Ah! I can see best by getting above the scene."

A few deer-like bounds took the Indian to the foot of the hills nearest the town. Rushing up the acclivity he gained a certain rock, and looked back.

He was now some distance above San Satano, and the fire was revealing every building within its precincts.

Fortunately for the town the night-winds were still. A gale would have doomed the camp beyond hope of salvation.

Silk Hand looked on a few seconds in silence, like a person trying with all his might to locate a certain object, and all at once the truth seemed to burst upon him.

"Captain Juarez is the victim of the fire-fiend this time!" cried the Indian ferret. "Has some disappointed ticket-holder burned him out? The trap is doomed, and the yellow rascal—one of the men I want—will cast no more prizes over his greasy counter."

Higher and higher leaped the encircling flames.

Silk Hand noticed that the tough spectators stood a good ways off. Not one attempted to save anything from the flames. The little figure of Juarez the One-Eyed, which would have been visible from the Mohave's standpoint—was not seen rushing hither and thither in excitement.

Suddenly a terrific explosion seemed to rend the earth, blazing beams and pieces of weatherboarding vaulted into the air, and settling back like falling rockets, completed the doom of the lottery-shop.

It was apparent to Silk Hand that a quantity of powder had exploded, and the care with which the men of San Satano kept their distance told him that they knew of its presence in the trap.

The explosion extinguished the fire as completely as if it had been drenched with a flood, and with the exception of a few ambitious sparks nothing remained to tell of the startling event.

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed a voice above the Indian Vidocq. "They did not venture close to Captain Juarez's den for fear of the powder! Will they poke among the ruins for his body, the fools of San Satano? Mebbe not. Didn't she threaten to cut Juarez's face with her whip? Mebbe she thinks still of doing so! Juarez the One-Eyed has something that will go deeper than a cowskin lash, though in her hands it cuts like a sword. She won't whip Juarez—the she vulture of the desert. But some day the hand of the lottery king will get even for the threat. They won't find Juarez among his tickets, ha, ha, ha, no!"

Silk Hand, who had looked up at the first word, saw outlined between him and the azure diamond field the diminutive figure of the yellow sport of San Satano.

Juarez shook his clinched fist at the town and its toughs, and while the Indian watched, he vanished with his laugh to turn up again some time in an entirely different role.

CHAPTER VIII.

HAWK AND DOVE.

THE burning of the lottery trap was an unexpected event. The men of San Satano did not know what to make of it, but the larger part rejoiced at the work of the fire.

"The yellow viper thought he would not wait for the whip," laughed Cactus Clara, divining the true cause of the burning the moment she saw the leaping, twisting flames.

"Would you have cut him with your lash?" asked Colonel Centipede.

"Yes, and before quitting town, too."

Her eyes blazed as they had when she confronted Juarez with the uplifted lash.

"You hate him, Clara?"

"Hate him? I do! And yet he owes his very life to me, the ungrateful dog! The hearts of some men contain not even a spark of gratitude, and the yellow hound is one of these. Never mind, colonel. Our paths will cross some time—then let Juarez the One-Eyed look out."

Long before the rising of the sun the last embers of the lottery-shop went out, and when the golden luminary came over the western hills, he saw only a lot of scattered ruins black and suggestive.

The Queen of the Desert, who had occupied the "best room" of the Double Dagger Hotel, came early upon the porch and posed in the warm sunshine. Her presence was a surprise to many. She had come in the night, and few had been lucky enough to catch sight of her.

All who studied her agreed that a more beautiful woman they had seldom seen. Her figure, which was tall, was symmetry itself, and the luminous black eyes nestling behind the silken lashes were an index to a hot, impulsive soul.

She stood the impertinent scrutiny of the groups with a curious smile at her lips, as though she enjoyed the silent worship.

Every now and then she glanced across the Plaza, as if she expected some one to come from a certain direction, but, in reality, she was watching a little house above whose door hung a mass of flowering Arizona creepers.

All at once this door opened, and the woman on the porch responded with a slight start.

In the door appeared the graceful form of a young girl.

"It is she!" murmured Cactus Clara. "I behold Meda, the waif of the desert."

Yes, the one in the doorway was the girl whose strange history we have heard Colonel Centipede narrate in a few sentences.

Perhaps she saw the woman on the porch, for she looked at once toward the hotel and kept her eyes there.

"So that is the beauty of San Satano—the 'Angel of Arizona,' as Blonde Burt calls her," resumed Cactus Clara, in the same subdued tones. "I wonder if I couldn't spoil her pretty face with the whip that frightened Juarez till his teeth chattered? It wouldn't take more than one blow to do it, either, and a very light blow, too, for her skin must be as tender as a rabbit's."

It seemed to give the Queen of the Desert great pleasure to go on at this rate. Her eyes got a malicious sparkle under the heat of her words, and her skin reddened even to her fingertips, as Blonde Burt said it would when she was jealous.

Jealous of whom? Meda?

Why, she only now saw the girl for the first time, but already she was playing hawk to San Satano's dove.

Cactus Clara continued to watch the figure in the doorway, with her hands opening and closing at intervals.

She was not near enough to study Meda's face, but she could see enough to tell her that its beauty was a match for her own, though it had been cast in a different mold.

"I'll get a closer view directly," said Cactus Clara. "I think I can match a girl like that with the varied experience I've had," and she turned abruptly and went into the hotel.

Twenty minutes later, or after breakfast, she reappeared on the porch, but not to pose in the sunlight as before.

A goodly crowd of men had assembled, hoping to catch another glimpse of her, and twenty dark hands touched or lifted as many broad-brimmed hats as she stepped down.

"Don't they see a woman very often?" thought the Desert Queen, walking away. "I might make a stake here by publicly exhibiting myself, but I've got stakes enough, ha, ha!"

She walked straight toward the house with the creepers over the door, and in a short time her hands rapped softly.

In a moment the portal swung inward and Cactus Clara stood fairly face to face with Meda.

She had not misjudged the desert waif at a distance. Meda, the unknown, was very beautiful, and the flush which overspread her face when she greeted Cactus Clara, seemed to enhance her looks.

The Queen of the Desert was invited in, in cordial tones of silvery sweetness, and the following moment she stood in a neat room, where everything was in its place.

"I felt that I must get acquainted with you the moment I knew you were here," began Cactus Clara, relieving Meda from the embarrassment that showed itself in her face. "I am called Cactus Clara; sometimes the Queen of the Desert, though my subjects are few and my domain unbounded. I came in last night."

Meda replied that she was permitted to see so few members of her sex, that Cactus Clara was welcome.

"I knew you had come to San Satano," said the young girl.

"Who informed you?"

"I happened to see you pass my house in the light thrown out by Juarez's store."

"Yes, I recollect. I did pass you," smiled the Desert Queen. "Are you happy here, Meda?"

"Why not?" was the quick response.

"It is a strange place for one so young."

"San Satano? When one has no home but one, why court unhappiness and make life bitter?"

Cactus Clara was struck by Meda's argument. "But you were not born here?" she queried.

"No," and the waif of the desert smiled.

"What strange fortune established you in San Satano?"

"Ah! that I cannot tell as a whole."

"A mystery, then?" exclaimed the wily dark-eyed woman, as if she had not heard a word about Meda's history from Colonel Centipede's lips.

"Yes, a mystery as you call it," responded Meda. "Colonel Centipede found me five years ago bound to the wheel of a half-burned wagon on the scorched desert, nearly midway between San Satano and the Devil's Arrow. He says that a dead man lay under the wagon—a man with his face horribly mutilated. The horses were dead also. There were three of them,

though it was evident, so Colonel Centipede says, that one got away."

"Some foe swooped down upon you!" exclaimed Cactus Clara, who had watched Meda during her narration with bated breath.

"It must have been so."

"What! don't you recollect?"

"No," the girl smiled again. "Sometimes it almost comes back to me," and she passed her hand slowly across her forehead.

"Well, can't you go back of the tragedy on the plain?" persisted the Queen of the Desert.

"No. The torture of the broiling sun seemed to turn my brain. The past is strangely a blank to me, and I fear will remain so."

The beauty from the South looked disappointed.

"I never heard of a story like yours," said she. "The desert produces some singular events, but never, so far as I know, anything like this."

"So San Satano thinks."

"It is strange that somebody has not missed a team like yours."

"I've thought of that, too."

"Is your story generally known?"

"It has not been made a secret of."

Cactus Clara studied Meda for a moment in silence.

There was no telling what thoughts flitted through her mind.

"Are they kind to you here?" she suddenly inquired.

"Very kind."

"You are pretty enough to have a lover," and the desert beauty bent forward in her eagerness to catch the girl's reply.

Meda blushed and then showed her white teeth in an amused smile.

"They don't make much love in San Satano," she rejoined.

"Ha! not with such handsome men as Colonel Centipede and Blonde Burt on the stage?"

"Not even then."

"But you blushed when I mentioned a lover! Come, Meda, you might as well confess that even here, where they don't make 'much love,' as you say, the little god's arrow has found you out."

"Oh!" cried Meda artlessly. "If you force a confession, you may get it."

"I thought so!" laughed Cactus Clara. "If they don't make much love in San Satano, it didn't take a great deal to win you."

The young girl before her flushed scarlet at this ill-concealed insinuation. She took a step toward the Queen of the Desert, forcing that person to fall back while she pursed her lips into a derisive smile.

"You are welcome to visit me," continued Meda. "But you must not deride the love that has won my heart."

For a moment Cactus Clara was on the eve of bursting into a cruel laugh, but the change that had come over the waif of the plains held her in leash.

Indignation flashed in Meda's eyes, and the hand that rested on the edge of the table was clinched until the veins had sunk out of sight.

"I see you guard your honor," stammered the Desert Queen.

"It is all a woman has to guard!" came the lightning answer. "I am a waif on the world's tide. I am an unknown quantity in the drama progressing around me—"

"What drama?"

Meda seemed to realize that perhaps she had gone a step too far. She drew back.

"Never mind," she went on. "Where men and women are found there will be played a drama of some kind. My heart is no longer my own. I make the confession you have sought. But it cannot much interest you to know who has won the love of Meda of the desert. So let it pass!"

Cactus Clara saw that the interview was at an end.

"It may interest some one," she replied, the words seeming to come out through her teeth in the madness of the moment. "If I have roused resentment in your bosom let that pass also. You will know the world and its people better by and by."

In another minute the Queen of the Desert stood on the outside of the vine-arched door.

"There are claws under your velvet, I see!" she laughed over her shoulder as she moved off. "If I am not mistaken, I see the spirit of your hot-headed mother in the flashiness of your eyes. You wouldn't ventilate your love affair, eh? Don't tread on my ground, Meda of the desert! If you do, you'll wish you had perished by the vultures and the sun!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE FLASH OF A BLADE.

MEANTIME through the long lances of sunlight that illumined the mountains above San Satano, Silk Hand the Indian detective rode rapidly.

He had turned his back upon the wild town and its tough citizens and seemed eager to place a certain distance between himself and them within a given time.

Beyond the range which was not broad and which he crossed by means of a well discerned

pass, lay the wide and almost treeless desert of the Southwest.

When Silk Hand emerged from the range, he found himself face to face with this uninviting expanse.

His horse seemed to shrink from the journey before him, for the animation that had brightened his eyes among the mountains suddenly disappeared; but the Mohave urged him on with the spur.

The short grass had a dead look as if a fire had swept it at no distant day; but, in reality, its color was the work of the scorching sun. As far as the Indian's keen vision could extend he noted no clump of trees, not even the scrubby mesquite. He had before him a waste from which the bravest men had shrunk and amid whose sand the most courageous had fallen beneath the vultures and the sun.

But Silk Hand was not dismayed by the prospect ahead.

In a short time he had become a moving speck on the desert, and if one had watched him from the mountains, he would have seen him disappear as if the sand had engulfed him.

By dint of hard riding and the husbanding of his own and the horse's strength, as he knew how to do, the Red Ferret drew near to a town which from a certain distance bore some resemblance to San Satano.

It seemed to trend on one side to the edge of the desert, and the ignorant would have wondered why man had ever planted a settlement there. The shanties were rather numerous though straggling in their arrangement, but the main portion of the town had the inseparable Plaza which Arizona has borrowed from her more southern neighbor.

The shadows of night were again falling when Silk Hand rode into this town.

His horse was jaded and had a weary look, but the Indian himself appeared fresh in spite of the gallop across the desert.

Leaving the Plaza to his right, Silk Hand rode up to a certain house and knocked at the door without dismounting.

"Come in!" responded a voice on the inside.

"Come out," answered the Indian.

In an instant the door flew open and a young man of one and twenty sprung toward the Mohave.

"Yes, I'm back!" exclaimed the red-skin, answering the youth's look for his eyesspoke when his tongue did not.

"Did you see her, Silk Hand?"

"I saw her."

At the same time the dark hand of the speaker disappeared in his bosom and drew forth a packet which the youth grasped eagerly.

"I saw some one else," continued the red-skin as the bands before him hastened to break the seal forgetful of his presence.

"Colonel Centipede, eh?"

"Some one else."

The young man looked puzzled.

"She came into San Satano a short time behind me."

"What! the Queen of the Desert?" was the quick response.

The Mohave nodded.

"Was she on your trail, Silk Hand?"

"No."

"Came to San Satano by accident, then?"

"No, by design. She does nothing by accident, you ought to know, Louis."

"You are right!" cried the youth. "She is always planning. Did she cross your trail?"

"We did not meet; but I did not avoid her. If I had lingered a little longer at Juarez's counter, we might have collided."

"Ah! you cashed the ticket! You—"

A singular smile came to the Indian's dark lips.

"I come back a mite poorer than I went away, boy," he answered. "One cashes Captain Juarez's prizes with difficulty, and sometimes not at all."

"I don't understand."

Silk Hand rested one hand on his leg and proceeded to regale the attentive youth with the story of the outcome of his visit to San Satano.

He told it with no waste of words, and though he soon got through he did not miss any part of the drama.

"The One-Eyed may turn up here," added Silk Hand. "He has exiled himself, firing his shanty first, and is adrift once more. There is apt to be a scene should he encounter Cactus Clara, for, if the woman thinks him a coward all the time, she may have to dismiss the idea in a very summary manner. They must not meet. You know enough to know this, Louis. Not for the present, at least," added the Indian. "Should Juarez come to Wayback City and show signs of settling here, you must see that he moves on. This town is in Cactus Clara's domain, and she must not come down upon it and find the yellow viper here."

"I'll make him move on if he comes," said the young man.

"Without appearing in the affair, remember."

"Certainly. If he stops he will get orders from the Committee of Six."

"That will do the business," smiled the Mohave. "You are quick to catch my meaning,

Louis. Now, take your letter and enjoy it without interruption."

Silk Hand's figure straightened in the saddle.

"I may not be back for some days," he resumed, meeting the look that was fixed upon him. "I picked up another link in the chain at San Satano, boy."

"Good! When will the chain be complete?"

"I saw that question in your eye before your tongue spoke it. The chain will be complete when my hand can close on the prisoners who escaped ten years ago—one in California, the other in Mexico, and when I can untangle the skein that immeshes the life of a young girl. It is a life work, Louis. When it is done, Silk Hand the Mohave can turn his back on the crimes of civilization and go back to the vanishing wigwams of his people. I have learned your ways, your language and—yes, your crimes—to be able to punish the guilty and make the right triumph. The victory is almost in my hand, but there are clouds ahead. The vultures have whetted their beaks by this time for the ferret's blood. Even now, back yonder,"—he pointed toward the desert he had crossed—"the hunter rides on Silk Hand's trail. I know what has been done as if I had stood by and heard all. She does not come alone any longer. She has drawn on the Bank of Arizona, and the draft has been honored. Remember! If Juarez comes move him along. But see that the Committee of Six does not hang him. *That man belongs to me!*"

Five minutes after the uttering of the last word the strange red trailer of the Southwest, mounted on a fresh horse which a certain stall of Wayback City had yielded up, was on the gallop once more.

The night beyond the town swallowed him like the mouth of a cave and nothing told of his journey but the hoof-beats of his steed.

Louis the young man left behind went back into the house and shut the door.

Striking a light he opened the letter Silk Hand had delivered and proceeded to devour its contents with a lover's greedy eyes.

He soon became oblivious to his surroundings, and his cheeks alternately flushed and paled as he went to the bottom of the missive.

It seemed to be a mixture of good news and bad, but at the close the color came to the reader's cheeks and remained.

"I don't know which is the deeper mystery—Meda or Silk Hand," said the youth aloud when he had transferred the letter to his bosom. "I know the history of neither, but I am content to wait. With the Indian detective it is always the two men who escaped from prison—Marked Monte the Californian, and Jose Paquina, the Mexican cut-throat. And while he talks of them he puts in a word or two about another crime not theirs. The Indian is cool, and cunning. Meda tells me to trust him and I will."

The young speaker passed out into the street. Silk Hand had been gone more than an hour, and his horse had carried him far from Wayback City.

Louis walked to the Plaza where through a dozen open doors he saw the tough denizens of the town.

The dens of faro and monte were in full blast and the tables had their usual complement of the sporting fraternity of the Southwest.

For some moments the young man studied the spirited scene fully opened out for his inspection.

"I can sell out my share in the Jumping Jupiter any time," he murmured. "Half a dozen speculators want it, but I am listening to Silk Hand just now. Ah! there is Major Lasso now!"

He unconsciously spoke the last sentence aloud.

"Yes, there's the man who wants your share," said a voice behind him.

Louis turned. He had not thought that any one was near.

"Pardon me if I spoke out of season, Captain Louis," continued the same voice, as a man stepped forward. "I heard you say that there was the major, and I thought I'd remind you—"

"No harm done," broke in the young man. "But I don't want to sell to Major Lasso, nor to anybody else just now, for that matter."

By this time the arrowy and handsome figure of the person called Major Lasso had disappeared beyond one of the open doors, and was among the gamblers.

Louis had already ceased to follow it with his eye, but a subtle curiosity drew him toward the place.

"Can it be that the man I am to watch is already here?" he exclaimed. "Certainly there can be no living duplicate of Juarez the One-Eyed, and yet he must have had a good horse to reach Wayback so soon."

The interior of the monte bank whose door Louis had reached by this time was well provided with lights. Every occupant of the place was visible, but the man whom Louis had singled out had just taken a seat at one end of a long table.

With his eye still upon this individual, the young man walked into the den. He was barely noticed by half a dozen persons there.

Walking down the aisle between the tables, he

stopped within a few feet of the little yellow-skinned, one-eyed man, who was untying a buckskin bag which he had just dragged from his bosom.

At that moment Juarez, if the man was the single-sighted exile of San Satano, looked up and saw the penetrating look of Louis, the shareholder.

In an instant his face grew dark with sudden viciousness.

He seemed to realize that he was watched for a purpose.

Suddenly the buckskin bag fell from his grasp and struck the table with a metallic ring.

The next instant the little person was on his feet, and then he sprung straight at Louis before the youth could interpose a hand.

Louis was forced back and thrown across the table behind him.

"He's got a knife!" some one shouted.

At the same time Louis caught the glitter of steel in the madman's hand, then a twinge of pain shot through his breast, the lights in the room seemed to go out and all was dark.

As for Juarez the One-Eyed, he left his victim and dashed toward the door.

Right and left he struck with the dagger, but in vain.

A dozen hands seized him at once!

Just one hour afterward Louis came back to life as it were on a low cot in his own shanty.

"What did they do with him, Golden?" he asked the man who had been watching him some time.

"Nothing yet. The Committee o' Six ar' in council over his case."

"Where?"

"In the room back o' Roundhead's Ranch."

"Golden, I must go to them."

The nurse looked at his patient with amazement.

"Don't shake your head," continued Louis. "They must not hang that man!"

"Why, he tried to kill you."

"I know that, but for all that he doesn't belong to the Committee of Six."

"To whom, then?"

"Never mind that, Golden."

"To you, boy?"

Louis shook his head.

"Golden," said he, "won't you help me to the Committee?"

Golden said "yes."

CHAPTER X.

BEFORE THE TRIBUNAL.

LEANING on the strongest arm in Wayback, Louis, the young miner, went down through the moonlight to the back door leading into Roundhead's Ranch. When he appeared on the threshold with his white face he was received by six stalwart, handsome and stern-looking men with exclamations of surprise.

They as soon expected to see a dead man enter their councils as the youth.

These six comprised the acknowledged court of justice of Wayback and they meted out punishment with speedy and unsparing hands.

Nobody, however death-deserving his offense, was permitted to die without a session of the Committee of Six. The stern tribunal sat on every case, and when necessary the accused was allowed witnesses and counsel.

But here was a case which needed no plea.

Louis knew that the committee would not dally with Juarez's crime.

Men had been hanged in Wayback for less offenses. A card up a sleeve had choked more than one gambler, and that by the decree of the Court of Six.

Golden assisted his companion toward the rough table about which the six judges sat.

A tall candle threw a weird light around the place, making dim and grotesque shadows on the unplanned boards behind the men.

"He would come, gentlemen," said Golden to the tribunal before Louis could address them.

The Six looked at Silk Hand's friend.

"We won't want your evidence," said one. "It was a cold-blooded assault, and its motive was murder."

"I know that," answered Louis. "I am not here as witness, but as intercessor."

"For what?"

"For the prisoner's life."

The six men of Wayback looked from Louis to Golden inquiringly.

"What did you humor him for, Golden?" asked one. "Did he talk this way before you started?"

"I did," exclaimed Louis, throwing up his hand to keep back Golden's reply. "I am not out of my head, but in full possession of my senses. I am here to speak for the prisoner."

"He tried to kill you."

"Yes."

"If Grimshaw hadn't caught him the knife would have come down the second time."

"So Golden has told me."

"After that he started to run amuck to the door, slashing right and left."

Louis bowed.

"You don't want to speak for that man, do you?"

"I do!" replied Louis, with renewed firmness. "Gentlemen, he belongs not to us, but to a court

of vengeance which, beyond the bounds of Wayback, has already sat and condemned him."

"That yellow viper?"

"Yes, that man."

"Do you know him?"

"He is Juarez, of San Satano."

"The fleecer of old and young with his infernal lottery trick! We knew him the moment he came to the table. He deserves punishment for his swindle, to say nothing of the work of his dagger to-night. He must have had an old grudge against you, boy?"

"I can't imagine why he leaped at me so tigerishly," rejoined Louis with a faint smile.

"You have seen him before?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever win one of his prizes?"

"I never held a ticket in any of his schemes."

The six judges looked at one another, a puzzled expression on each face.

"If he mistook you for some one else so much the worse for him," said the spokesman of the tribunal. "We can't excuse such mistakes."

"Then," returned Louis, "then, you have condemned Juarez of San Satano?"

"We have."

"What is to be the sentence?"

"Death."

"When?"

"To-morrow at sunrise on the Plaza."

"Gentlemen, this must not be! I appear—"

"Don't let us waste words!" interposed the chief of the stern Six. "This case has passed beyond your hands. The prisoner tried to commit murder. We have condemned him to death and the sentence will be carried out as surely as the sun rises in the morning! We don't recognize the right of one whose life he attempted to try to cheat justice. Juarez the One-Eyed has been tried for his last crime, and we, as a court, refuse to admit any claim which others may have upon him. We deal with the present; we shall hang the murderer at the hour prescribed by the Tribunal of Wayback!"

Louis looked from face to face and saw unalterable firmness in each one.

"If I can prevent, this so-called judicial murder shall never take place!" he cried.

"You can't prevent, boy," was the response, and the deep-set eyes of the speaker—the renowned Major Lasso of Wayback—glittered strangely. "The yellow dog isn't worth the skin he wears, and for a man of your good sense and worth to plead for his life with a knife slit in your breast—made by Juarez of San Satano—It is incomprehensible!"

"To you, Major Lasso, yes; but not to me," and Louis turned to the handsome mine-boss who had just spoken.

"You don't know what I know—"

"If you mean that I don't know why that man ought to be reprieved, I say I don't want to know!" broke in Major Lasso. "This court has adjourned. Golden, take your patient back and be careful with him. We can't comply with his request. It is simply preposterous. It is a known rule in Wayback that the sentence of this tribunal is final. And the man on your arm, Golden, knew it when he came here."

Louis saw the six judges turn their backs on him and walk toward the door that opened into the animated room a few feet away.

He had failed.

"They must spare the prisoner—Juarez!" he exclaimed, nearly breaking from Golden's grasp. "One moment, Major Lasso. You want my shares in the Jumping Jupiter Mine."

The head judge of the Six looked over his shoulder at the frantic youth.

"My stock is in the market!" continued Louis.

"It is yours—every dollar's worth of it—for a reversal of the sentence just passed."

Major Lasso burst into a laugh.

"Your offer is no temptation," said he, looking at Louis. "I guess a thousand shares in the biggest bonanza underground wouldn't touch bottom in the matter before us. No, Louis, my boy; you can't reverse the sentence of the Tribunal with an offer like that."

Louis with a cry of despair fell back into Golden's arms.

"Take me back, Golden," he whispered to the faithful Arizonian. "I have failed to turn the sentence, but the end is not yet."

A moment afterward the figure which had tottered from shanty to ranch went back over the same ground, held up by the strength of Golden who with head bent low listened to the half-incoherent sentences that dropped from Louis's tongue.

Once more the young victim of Juarez's knife lay at full length on the shanty cot completely exhausted.

It was plain that, no matter what the camp thought about his condition, he hung between life and death.

A raging fever had already set in, and Golden held a hot hand while he studied the face on the pillow.

"He made me promise to keep Juarez from stopping here if he came!" suddenly cried Louis. "The yellow cat belongs to Silk Hand, the Mohave. He is on the great trail of his life. He is putting link after link together, and he says that Juarez must not fall by the wrong hand. But they rejected my plea! The Tri-

bunal of Wayback would not listen. I wish to Heaven the Indian whirlwind would come back. I am helpless and friendless, where I should have friends."

Golden heard these exclamations while he bent over Louis, with his heart in his throat and a strange expression on his swarthy face.

"I guess the boy should have been heard," he murmured. "I did not think that the Injin was mixed up in the case. The Mohave detective knows what he is about, and if he wants Juarez freed from the sentence of the Tribunal, by Jupiter, he should not hang."

Golden drew back and turned down the light until the interior of the cabin was almost dark.

Then he came back to the young miner's bed and listened for a moment over the pillow.

Louis had fallen into a restless slumber, and his lips were moving in low sounds.

Golden passed his dark hand across the brow with a woman's tenderness.

"He sha'n't be friendless in Wayback!" he exclaimed, stepping away. "He had set his mind on freeing Juarez, the One-Eyed, but the Tribunal would not listen. I saw a quick, avaricious glitter in Major Lasso's eyes when he offered his stock in the Jumping Jupiter for a reversal of the sentence. There is no telling what the major would have said, had they been alone. If I'm not mistaken, there is still a chance in a dozen left."

In another minute the door of the cabin had opened and closed softly.

A figure went down the street on the outside and pressed the latch of a door beyond the Plaza.

Golden and Major Lasso were face to face once more.

The major was seated at a table well provided with the liquid comforts of border life, and the glass he was raising to his lips at Golden's entrance, was put suddenly down with its contents untasted.

"Just the man I want to see!" cried Major Lasso. "How is the boy?"

There was no response until Golden had reached the table.

"He's not feeling good over the verdict, major," he answered.

"I presume not. Do you think he meant what he said last, Golden?"

"About his stock?"

"Yes."

"He meant every word of it."

Major Lasso seemed to reflect a moment.

"You know how I answered him?" he smiled.

"Well, I couldn't reply in any other strain. We had just sentenced the prisoner."

"I understand that," insinuated Golden, believing that by coming to Major Lasso he had scored a point. You could not help saying what you did. I think that Louis was a little fast in making the proposition just then, but his head was in a whirl, and he thought he would make a final effort."

"That's the case precisely stated. What are his shares worth, Golden?"

"You have offered him twenty thousand for them."

"Ah! so I have!"

"They are increasing in value."

"Rapidly, too. He has no other property?"

"None in the world. He offered you all his worldly possessions for the life of Juarez the One-Eyed."

"The man who tried to kill him!" remarked Major Lasso. "There must be some powerful motive back of all this."

Golden made no reply.

"Do you think the transfer could be made in secret—without the knowledge of the other members of the court?" queried the major, dropping his voice to a whisper as he leaned across the table.

"I'll guarantee that, Major Lasso."

"You appreciate the risks I assume."

"No one can appreciate them better."

The head judge of the dread Tribunal took a long breath.

"I may get my own head into the halter," he answered, artfully. "Juarez of San Satano may not die to-morrow."

Golden smiled. He had won.

CHAPTER XI.

VULTURES ON THE TRAIL.

WHEN morning came, it was discovered that the man who had been posted as guard in front of the strong wooden prison of Wayback City was lying unconscious on his beat.

More than this, the prisoner had escaped, and Juarez had fled from the shadow of the border noose.

These two revelations created great excitement.

They could but throw little light on the mystery. Some one had sprung like a tiger round the corner of the cabin, and had choked him into insensibility with a pair of hands that had a satanic clutch.

He had not seen enough of his assailant to identify him, and the whole affair was as dark as the night at the time of the liberating leap.

The toughs of Wayback could not think of any one so disloyal as to release a man who had

attempted to take half a dozen lives with the dagger.

Never before had a man who had been sentenced by the Committee of Six been rescued between the condemnation and the noose.

Was there a traitor in camp? Had the yellow scoundrel a friend in Wayback—one who had choked the guard and then helped him to liberty?

In the midst of the discussion two unexpected persons rode into the town.

They came from the north, and there were plenty of signs about them that they had crossed the desert.

One of the riders was a handsome woman, with roving black eyes and a faultless figure.

Her companion, who filled the saddle like a Gaucho, was a man of thirty. His blonde hair fell over his broad shoulders, and his fine looks were heightened by a rich mustache of the same soft hue.

Cactus Clara and Blonde Burt!

If they had come sooner there might have been a different ending to the drama of which Juarez of San Satano was the hero.

As it was the One-Eyed was far away, and they had arrived too late to find him, guarded and doomed.

"No one has seen the Indian," said the Queen of the Desert, rejoining Blonde Burt, after a short round of inquiry in Wayback.

"Can we be off the trail?" queried the sport. "It is not often that well-known hoofs deceive me."

"Wayback is excited over a tragedy of its own."

"Yes, Juarez used his knife here last night. How is the young man he stabbed?"

"Major Lasso reports him as a little better."

"But with the chances against him."

"Yes."

"You did not drop in to see him, Clara?"

"I did not. I thought of nothing but the Indian trailer."

Blonde Burt's lips got a smile.

"But I shall go to him now," continued the woman after a moment's pause. "Have the horses ready on the Plaza. We are going on."

Cactus Clara walked away, and in a moment rapped gently on Louis's door. The portal opened in quick response, and Golden, the bronze watch, saluted her.

"You will let me see him, won't you?" said the Desert Queen, stepping inside on tiptoe.

Golden looked at her with rising suspicions, but her manner seemed to dismiss them, for he said in reply:

"Certainly. You will find him asleep, though restless. He's been talking to himself off and on all night, but his sentences are disconnected; for the fever is still on."

By this time Cactus Clara had taken possession of Golden's three-legged stool, and was gazing at the flushed face lying in the sunlight, which at that moment streamed over the pillow.

In an instant, her first look of womanish curiosity had changed to one of profound surprise.

It seemed that a startling revelation had burst upon Cactus Clara's vision.

"He's talking again, ain't he?" smiled Golden, coming up.

The Queen of the Desert did not appear to catch his words. She was listening intently.

"Can't you call him back, Golden?" muttered Louis. "He can't be very far off. Unless he comes, they will hang Juarez, and he will never get to complete his game."

Cactus Clara looked up into Golden's face as the last words died away.

"Whom does he ask for?" she inquired.

"I don't know, unless the Indian who came in last night."

The woman could not altogether suppress the effects of the unlooked-for information. She felt that the thrill of excitement had sent a flush to her temples.

"When did he come in?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Didn't you see him?"

"No."

"Then he did not remain long."

"I cannot say."

Cactus Clara looked toward the dagger's victim, but the lips were still, as if the mind was once more at rest.

She studied the face in silence a few moments. "Does he ever say which way the Indian went?" she suddenly inquired.

"Toward Dos Lopedo."

"Was he alone?"

"He was."

"Who saw him besides the young man here?"

"No one."

The huntress of the Southwest left the stool and looked down at Louis with a softened expression. Her face had lost much of its marble sternness, and she seemed to regard the young miner as one who lay in the shadows of the valley.

"What do you think of his chances?"

Golden shook his head.

"To-morrow will tell it," said he.

"For life or death, eh?"

"Yes."

"On which side will the balances fall?"

"On life's, I hope."

Cactus Clara went to the door and her hand was on the latch, when Golden covered the space between them with a quick stride.

"You are going away?" he queried.

"Yes."

"After the Indian?"

The Queen of the Desert dropped her hand.

"Why do you ask that?" she exclaimed.

"I've just had a revelation," answered Golden.

"Ah! do you get one often?"

There was a bit of defiance mingled with the sarcasm of the woman's sentence.

"Never mind that. You can go without answering my question. I know who you are. He's been talking about you, too," and the bronze nurse of Wayback glanced furtively toward Louis.

"He has, eh?" cried Cactus Clara, allowing a quick, resentful light to flash up behind her silken lashes. "What did he say?"

Golden was now a match for her. He showed it by keeping silent and in giving her a smile as good as her own.

"Oh, keep the secret if it is one!" she cried.

"I don't have to betray my plans because a delirious man mutters."

With this she pulled the door open and would have stepped out if Golden had not checked her by a clutch.

"You are at liberty to follow the Indian," he said in low tones. "He will be on the alert and from what I've heard of him I guess he can hold his own."

She drew back the full length of his arm and eyed him a moment in silence.

"You can look me through and see that I mean every word I've said," continued the man of Wayback. "The Indian is no tenderfoot. You will discover this before the game ends."

"What game?"

"Just as if you know nothing of the past nor the present," Golden laughed. "If the boy yonder gets well, his hand will be found in at the death. If you're after the red, go and find him. But be careful! You are two to one—I've seen your pard, you know—but Silk Hand knows the trail as you are said to know the desert."

Golden dropped Cactus Clara's arm at this moment and sprung to the cot.

A strange rattle had sounded in Louis's throat and he had opened his eyes.

"I can manage him," he cried looking at the woman. "I don't want him to see you here—not now at least."

With another glance at Louis, and one full in Golden's face the desert Jezebel darted away and when the nurse had assisted his patient he glared at the open door with rage in his eyes.

"By the Lord, I hope you will find the Indian ferret of Arizona!" he murmured. "Take the trail to Dos Lopedo, but as I've warned you, woman, when Silk Hand turns, look out!"

Already Cactus Clara was walking rapidly toward the Plaza where Blonde Burt awaited her with two horses. The handsome sport watched her with eagerness while she came up.

"I've found the trail!" she cried, halting by his saddle and showing him her face flushed with triumph.

"Silk Hand's, eh?"

"Yes."

"Who enlightened you?"

"Louis and his nurse."

She walked round to her own horse and in a moment was in the saddle.

"Come, Blonde Burt. We are on the home stretch. The quarry awaits us, and this time we won't play desert vultures for nothing."

There was no response to her words as if none was required and in a moment two horses went south side by side on the Indian's trail.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SHADOW OF A CRISIS.

By and by Blonde Burt came back to San Satano.

When he was expected by no one he rode into the town in the valley on a magnificent horse and dressed in new toggery from head to foot.

A brown sombrero of ample dimensions of rim sat jauntily on his head. Its band was the richly spotted skin of some southern snake and bits of yellow silk fringe had been sewn to the ends. His open light fitting coat was ornamented with gorgeous braid, and his pantaloons dropped over his soft boots the heels of which were provided with silver spurs.

Night was fallen when he entered San Satano and he seemed to pass unnoticed to a certain house in front of which he dismounted.

One minute afterward he walked into a room occupied at the time by a handsome man although there were "glasses for two" on the table before him.

"By Jove! you come back in all the grandeur of a Mexican Don!" exclaimed Colonel Centipede when the first greetings were over.

"Why not?" grinned Blonde Burt in return helping himself without an invitation.

The nabob of San Satano looked him over another time before he spoke again.

"What was the result of the hunt?" he asked.

Blonde Burt opened and shut his hand.

"You mean you had him but he got away?" cried Centipede.

"Not quite that, colonel. We saw his shadow."

"But lost the substance, eh?"

The handsome sport nodded.

"Where did you leave Cactus Clara?"

Blonde Burt shrugged his shoulders.

"I left her at Dos Lopedo," said he.

"Her old capital!"

"Yes."

"Was she going to follow the trail?"

"There was no trail, colonel. The Indian fox disappeared among the mesquite as if the earth had opened and swallowed him."

"Which made Clara's eyes flash, no doubt?"

Blonde Burt laughed.

"I've seen them flash before, but never like they did then," he replied.

"She had counted on finding the Indian this time."

"Yes."

"Will she attempt to recover the trail?"

"I don't know."

"Did she speak of going back to the desert?"

"She said something about it."

"Whom did she meet at Dos Lopedo?"

"Several members of her old band."

"By arrangement, do you think?"

"No, by accident."

The last answer seemed to plunge Colonel Centipede into a train of reflection.

After awhile he asked with a curious smile on his lips:

"Did you run across our old friend Juarez?"

"Not exactly. We missed—just missed him—at Wayback City."

"I heard he was there," responded Centipede.

"He flashed up like powder and used his knife."

"Yes, and killed a young man who was in some way connected with the Mohave trailer."

"Killed him, did you say, Captain Burt?"

smiled the colonel.

"He was as good as dead when we left."

"If that is the way Juarez kills people, he will never fill a graveyard."

Blonde Burt looked astonished. There was a sly twinkle in the depths of Colonel Centipede's black eyes.

"Did the young fellow—Louis they called him I think—come out on top in his wrangle with death?"

"If you were to look at him, you would think he did."

"I did not come back by way of Wayback. I left it to the right."

"You would not have seen the young man if you had stopped there. He has emigrated."

"Sought a more congenial climate, has he?" observed Blonde Burt.

"Yes, if you call San Satano such a one."

The handsome sport fell back in his chair and stared at his companion who went on.

"When the young man conquered the fever that followed the stab, his recovery was something marvelous. He had a devoted partner to help him through—one of those big hearted men who, when they like a fellow, freeze to him through thick and thin. They are in San Satano now—Louis and Golden."

"When did they come?"

Blonde Burt's quick query showed the interest he took in the subject.

"They've been here four days," answered Centipede.

"Have they located?"

"Louis has, I think. I don't know what Golden intends doing; but it isn't likely that he will desert the boy."

The keen eyes of Centipede must have seen the cloud that gathered on Blonde Burt's brow.

"You don't seem to know much about the young person called Louis," he resumed.

"He's outspoken, genial and intelligent."

"But he is in some way connected with the Indian Silk Hand."

"Are you sure of this?"

"I am. It was Louis who put us on the Mohave's trail when we got to Wayback. It is true he did it unconsciously, but men sometimes tell startling truths in their dreams. When Silk Hand rode through Wayback after his doings here he stopped to see but one person."

"Was the favored one Louis?"

"It was."

Colonel Centipede glanced toward the door across the room as if it had opened, but it was closed and no one had come in.

"You are absolute master here," Blonde Burt went on. "You know how important it is to make everything secure. The designs of that tireless Indian are not unknown to you. He has made himself familiar with the trails of California, as well as with certain affairs that happened years ago in a different part of the country. Is it a wonder that Cactus Clara turns from the desert to follow him from pillar to post? She sees the shadow, but never grasps the substance. That Indian is shrewd. He has the cunning of the fox and the coolness of a first-class detective. He came to San Satano with the prize ticket which had belonged to Sonora Si, whose bones I found lashed to the carcass of his horse. Of course you make the plays you think best, Colonel Centipede. I come and go, and have nothing any more in common with the drama you play out here."

"Don't tell me that!" exclaimed Centipede, coloring. "It is true that the San Satano Wheel of Fortune has ceased to turn; but our partnership did not end with it."

"What unites us?" asked Blonde Burt, smiling. "The profits of the scheme have been divided?"

"Yes."

"Juarez will never come back to renew the scheme."

"You do not know that."

Another glance toward the door.

"The little man may be nearer than you think, Captain Burt," continued Colonel Centipede.

"Surely he has not the audacity to return to San Satano after burning his shop and endangering the whole town."

"You always thought Juarez audacious enough for anything. Let me prove that your opinion of him was not overdrawn."

At the close of his speech Colonel Centipede struck the table with his knuckles, and the door twice glanced at flew open.

"The devil in yellow, sure enough!" exclaimed Blonde Burt, fixing his eyes on the dividing-line of the two rooms.

A victorious twinkle lit up the one orb that glowed in the small man's head, and the next moment Juarez stepped nimbly across the carpet and halted before Blonde Burt, to whom he bowed with mock courtesy.

The handsome sport looked him over with a good deal of curiosity, in which there was a sprinkling of contempt.

"You haven't felt the whip yet, I see," he remarked.

Juarez the One-Eyed shut his teeth hard.

"She will never strike Juarez!" he exclaimed.

"Not if you keep your distance."

"Juarez won't step from her path. He ran from her once, but he runs no more."

Blonde Burt broke into a laugh that irritated the late lottery sharp of San Satano.

"Captain Burt doesn't take Juarez at his word," the little man went on. "He thinks he will scamper from the shadow of Queen Clara's lash; but he will not. This is better than a whip. It cuts deeper than the lash, and it reaches a heart when the whip never gets far beneath the skin."

Juarez drew from his braided sleeve a long bright dagger that tapered gracefully to a needle-like point, and his eye seemed to reflect the scintillations of the polished steel in the lamplight.

"Will she whip Juarez when he carries this?" he continued, turning the dagger over and over like a merchant eager to show its good points.

"It won't outreach her lash," said Blonde Burt.

"But Juarez can jump twenty feet. He has practiced the spring of the panther, and his eye is an accurate measurer of distance. Now what says Captain Burt? Will the Queen of the Desert cut Juarez's face with her whip?"

"I'd advise you to keep clear of her," was the response.

"She may come upon you unawares."

"She can't! Juarez hears the slightest sound, and when he is asleep he scents the foe. Now, will Cactus Clara whip him?"

"Yes! yes!" cried Blonde Burt. "Days, weeks, months may pass away, but she will as surely cut your face into strips as the sun rises and sets. You deserted her at Dos Lopedo when the fever was on. You did not go away empty-handed, either. And that after what she had done for you!"

The face of the yellow sport grew almost dark.

He picked up the dagger and wound his long silken fingers about the handle in a manner that seemed to give him malicious delight. At the same time one of Blonde Burt's hands went to his left pocket and rested there.

Cunning as the latter movement was, Juarez detected it, and the following moment he put up the knife.

"After your play at Wayback I wouldn't advise you to be too prominent here," Blonde Burt went on.

"I will see to that," replied Colonel Centipede. "Juarez has returned to settle some business affairs, and the settlement won't bring him in contact with Louis and his friend, Golden. He has been my guest ever since he came, and he will depart soon, with San Satano none the wiser for his presence here."

"That will do," rejoined the Southwest sport. "I repeat my advice, Juarez. Steer clear of Cactus Clara, and Louis and his pard."

The One-Eyed showed his teeth in response as Blonde Burt left the room.

On the step in front of the house the dandy sport smiled to himself.

"The unexpected has happened," he murmured. "I know as well what brought Louis to San Satano as he knows himself. It is a cool move, but not unworthy of him. He is in the hands of Silk Hand, the red detective. Already he has hoodwinked Colonel Centipede; but the game must stop right here, or I quit it. The youth from the South must be met and matched. What does the girl think? Of course she knows that he is here, and they wait together for the Indian. Colonel Centipede, you must act. The coil is tightening, and if this boy is permitted to

remain here, the strength of Hercules and a world's cunning will not avert the catastrophe."

He walked off through the starlight with hands clinched and a flash in his eyes.

Blonde Burt felt the crisis.

CHAPTER XIII.

SOME ONE FINDS A SECRET.

"WHAT will he do, colonel?" eagerly questioned Juarez, the One-Eyed, when the door had closed on the figure of the blonde sport.

"What will who do?"

"Captain Burt."

Colonel Centipede looked puzzled.

"I don't understand you, Captain Juarez," said he.

The yellow sport came closer, with his single eye aglow with a light which the boss of San Satano could not interpret.

"Are you blind, colonel?" he laughed, leaning across the table, with his gaze riveted on the man on the opposite side. "There's a pretty girl in San Satano—an angel saved once from the vultures and the sun."

"Meda!" exclaimed Centipede. "I saved her myself, Juarez."

"So you did," continued the ex-lottery sharp. "I saw you come into camp with her lying unconscious across your saddle. I thought her then, with her sun-blistered face and half-starved look, one of the most beautiful creatures I had ever seen. Now— Ah! Colonel Centipede a finer pearl than Meda the Unknown was never picked up in the desert."

"By Jovel when did you get poetical?" laughed Colonel Centipede, leaning back in his chair and studying the face before him. "You have told me since you have come back that you shall hate woman with all your heart and never again to your dying day sound her praises. But here you are, Captain Juarez, praising her to the skies. You change your opinions as the chameleon does his spots."

Juarez appeared to wince under Centipede's words, and his hand darted forward and clutched the Arizonian's wrist.

"I didn't praise Cactus Clara, did I?" he cried.

"No."

"Meda is cast in a different mold. She is an angel, the Queen of the Desert has the blood of a harpy in her veins!" answered Juarez. "That is why I praise the pearl you found under the deserted wagon. But you heard me awhile ago, colonel. Blonde Burt likes pretty women."

A flush, one of rising indignation, mantled Colonel Centipede's temples.

Did he see that the cunning Juarez perhaps out of revenge for Blonde Burt's prophecy concerning the future whipping was trying to excite jealousy between old friends?

The yellow sport was capable of anything.

"We all like pretty faces when you pin us down to the truth," Centipede responded with a laugh.

"But the choice of all is not the same. Where there is but the face to admire, however, the many will admire it."

Juarez crept back over the table as if he had deposited his sting and was satisfied.

Without appearing to look at the result of his insinuation he emptied the glass which stood handy and glided toward the door.

"To bed, Captain Juarez?" asked Colonel Centipede.

"Yes. I go to-morrow. It is a long ride, colonel, and I must lay some plans before I close my eyes."

Colonel Centipede did not restrain the yellow sport, but waved him a good-night and was alone.

As for the snake in yellow, he went to a little room a few feet beyond the top of the stairway which he found beyond the nabob's.

"I think I paid you back, Captain Burt!" he laughed to himself. "You delighted to say that some day the whip will cut Juarez's face into strips and Juarez sealed his lips for a little while. Now who is ahead? Don't I know what to plant to reap a good crop and when and where to sow the seed? What made Colonel Centipede start and get red when I told him that you like pretty faces? The arrow went home, Captain Burt. It quivers in the bull's-eye of the target and you will feel it by and by."

He had shut the door of the little room behind him, and fastened it with a bolt.

The only light that contended with the darkness there was that which the crescent in the eastern skies showered through the panes.

Juarez went to the window and looked out.

He saw the houses of the street that straggled toward the mountains and seemed to lose itself among them.

"Why not?" muttered Juarez. "The way is clear and I know it well when there is no moon. I can do no more here. Colonel Centipede and Captain Burt for it now. Besides, if I stayed I might encounter the two pards from Wayback, and the red-skin might come back—for the prize money. I will go. Far from San Satano I will resurrect my Wheel of Fortune and it will turn for Juarez alone. He will have no partners. Ah! he has had enough of such

people. They want the lion's share for the slug-gard's work. From to-night Juarez is his own master."

San Satano seemed to be too busy to see the figure that dropped to the ground from Colonel Centipede's window.

When it touched the solid earth it ran nimbly away and vanished in a minute among the shanties.

Of course it was Juarez.

At nearly the same time Colonel Centipede left the house by the front door.

He cast furtive glances about as if in fear of spies, and then with rapid strides went toward the mouth of the Arizona Queen Mine.

"If Blonde Burt has come back she may not be far behind him," said the colonel. "I promised her that I would obliterate the inscription on the wall and I'll do it now."

Not long afterward the strength of Centipede pulled open the heavy door of the secret dungeon in the heart of the mine. Passing into the place itself he drew the door nearly to by means of a ring in the iron.

Then he threw upon the wall before him the light of a lantern he had lighted since entering the mine, and read in silence the terrible words which some time before had startled the Queen of the Desert.

The handwriting of the dead—the dead hand at his very feet—appeared to stand out with more emphasis than ever.

Colonel Centipede read the whole thing through, even lingering over the curse and prophecy with a derisive smile.

"This is what the Indian Javert would like to see before he closes in!" he exclaimed. "He is now tracing the history of this boy who vanished all at once like a bubble in the air. The question still asked in some quarters—Where is Arthur Malabar? could be answered here."

The nabob of San Satano looked down at the terrible picture at his feet, but he did not look long.

He returned to the words on the stone and took from an inner pocket a small hammer and a chisel.

Swinging the lantern on his arm by the ring at the top, he began to cut out the dead man's record. Pieces of stone fell at his feet and sprinkled the face of the dungeon's victim.

Colonel Centipede went rapidly over the wall, giving blow after blow and completely cutting away the marks which, if not molested, would have stood for ages against two people.

"That'll do!" he exclaimed, surveying his work when it was completed. "I defy the keenest eyes in a human head to say what the boy left on the stone. Cactus Clara would be satisfied if she could see my work, but she may never see it."

He pocketed hammer and chisel again, and turned his back on his task.

Beyond the threshold he pushed the heavy door back and turned the key in the lock.

If he had been very particular, he would have discovered that the portal did not fit as usual in its frame.

He could not see the nail which prevented this consummation, and so he turned the key and hurried off.

His lantern soon became a spark in the sinuous corridors of the old mine, and then disappeared altogether.

"Now let me see what he was doing in there," exclaimed a voice at the door of the secret cell.

"He hammered at the wall as if he was chiseling out a record of some time. I could see his hand move along in front of the mallet, but the shadow of his body and the distance I had to keep proved too much for me."

At the conclusion of these words the door swung open and the form of a man crept over the dark threshold.

"I haven't got the sign of a match, therefore, my fingers must have eyes," continued the man. "I always thought there was a dungeon somewhere in the old bonanza. I've found it at last."

He went forward till his foot struck the silent tenant of the place, then with a cry of discovery he stooped and felt the dried body from head to foot.

"Not much of a surprise!" came from between the man's lips. "It was nearly three years ago when I looked out o' my shanty and saw two horses go by. The moon was full and its light revealed everything. The rider nearest me was a boy. I could even see that he was pale and troubled. Heaven! how white he looked. On the other side of him rode a woman who has no counterpart in the wide world. Didn't I know her the moment I saw her? On my oath if I had but one breath to draw I could name her now. The two passed on and the next day I saw the same woman on the porch of the Double Dagger Hotel looking as serene as if she had not had her hand in something devilish. I looked for the boy, but never saw him afterward."

"I've found him now!" the man laughed. "I know what became of the youth they still talk about in Sonora. But let me see—no, feel—what Colonel Centipede was doing with hammer and chisel."

He stepped across the dead and passed his hands over the wall.

"The boy left a record here!" he exclaimed. "Colonel Centipede has just cut it out."

Again and again he felt the stone following the track of the well-tempered chisel and now and then smiling to himself though he could see nothing and was himself unseen.

"I'll see if I can find something worth taking," this spy continued as if he delighted to talk to himself. "If I'm not mistaken I've got a bonanza to sell. And a bigger one than this, too."

For several minutes he remained bent over the strangely preserved body on the floor of the cavern.

The sharpest eyes could not have told whether he found anything worth taking or nothing at all.

At length he crept toward the door.

It took all his strength, judging from his short respirations to shut the door, and when he had completed the task he sprung away.

It did not take him long to emerge from the mouth of the nabob's mine.

"The man who says I haven't got a bonanza secret of my own lies in his throat!" he chuckled. "I'll find a market for it, too. And when I want to sell, I'll name my own price and get it!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MINERS ON LA PAZ.

DID the cunning little sport—Juarez the One-Eyed—suspect that Meda of the Desert had inspired in the bosom of Colonel Centipede those sentiments that will brook no interference by anything which resembles rivalry?

If such a suspicion had never entered his head, why did he let fly the shafts that seemed to pierce the nabob of San Satano so deeply while he (Juarez) leaned over his table?

Colonel Centipede returning from the mine where he had obliterated with mallet and chisel the record of the dead stopped short at sight of a certain light visible in a small window.

"My head on the turn of the dice that the girl has a visitor!" exclaimed the colonel approaching the structure over whose door, the moonlight disclosed a natural arch of flowering vines.

In another moment he was at the house and then he leaned beyond the edge of the window and looked in.

The scene that rewarded the eavesdropper and spy was one that seemed to give his blood new warmth as it leaped through his veins.

The neatest, cosiest room in San Satano was before him.

A small table occupied the center of the floor and the lamp that graced it revealed two persons to the glittering eyes of Colonel Centipede.

He did not appear to see the young girl, for the man who leaned back in his chair across the table with his hat set high on his broad forehead and the spotted snake-skin band with its silk fringe dangling over his ear.

Blonde Burt had dropped in to see Meda!

"Juarez didn't miss it far!" murmured the colonel, and the words seemed to come out through his teeth. "When he said that Blonde Burt is fond of pretty faces, he meant more than he let on. I'll force the rest of it—the whole truth—from him before he goes away."

Colonel Centipede was in some danger of being caught in his new role both by some one passing along the street and by a glance toward the window by either of the inmates of the room; but the peril did not frighten him off.

"I think the strange mystery that envelopes your life can be solved," Blonde Burt said to Meda, in tones that reached Colonel Centipede, telling him that he had arrived on the scene at an important stage of it.

The girl returned a smile.

"The person who does this must win the victory without assistance from me," she replied.

"Ah! you know nothing then?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"But there is a starting-point," persisted Blonde Burt. "Every trail has one, Meda."

"One would think so."

"I can go back and come up from the beginning."

Meda the Unknown did not answer.

It was evident that she was not going to give the Southwest sport any encouragement.

"I intend to go back—to follow the trail of your wagon from its starting point to the spot where you were rescued from the vultures and the sun."

"It may be a long trail—labor lost," replied Meda with a faint smile.

"Not labor lost if I find the trail!" cried Blonde Burt.

"I cannot reward you."

A sudden gleam lit up the fine eyes of the blonde sport.

"We will talk of that later on," said he. "A girl like you—one with your beauty, I mean—is richer than the beauties of Frisco and the East. I don't expect any reward until I've found the trail and solved the mystery of the desert tragedy."

Meda saw him quit his chair and stand before her, his handsome figure fully revealed by her lamp.

Never before had Blonde Burt looked so mag-

nificent. Meda had never seen him in such gaudy toggery which, though intended originally no doubt for the figure of some Sonora or Mexican sport, fitted him as though made for it.

"I may not start immediately," he proceeded, looking down at the Angel of San Satano. "But I will soon be on the road."

"Tempt no dangers for my sake," replied the girl. "I am content to let it all remain a shrouded, sand-covered mystery rather than see one suffer on the trail."

"Leave that to me," laughed Blonde Burt.

Colonel Centipede's figure disappeared round the corner of the house and the next moment a shaft of light fell across the ground beyond the door.

He heard the step and saw the figure of Blonde Burt going through the moonlight toward the Plaza.

"If not curbed he will play a high hand here," said the colonel. "There will be an open rivalry for the first place in Satano if I don't stop it now. I shall stop it!"

Five minutes later he crossed the threshold of his own house and went straight to the room which he thought was occupied by Juarez the One-Eyed.

A dozen raps failed to elicit a response.

Colonel Centipede grew angry again.

Stepping back and muttering an oath he threw his whole weight against the portal and fell headlong into the room beyond.

The cot against the wall had not been occupied and Juarez was gone!

For a moment the flushed and fuming nabob of Arizona glared at the scene and then turned on his heel.

"So much the better perhaps. It won't do to trust Juarez with too many secrets," he said to himself. "There's too much of the traitor in his make-up. Gold dollars in his eyes are as big as cart-wheels, and he don't care how he gets them."

Colonel Centipede seemed to rejoice in the absence of the man he had just sought. He left the house and sought the bar-room of the hotel on the Plaza.

There the first man he saw was Blonde Burt. The following instant the two men stood face to face.

"I want to see you a moment—important and private," said the colonel.

"Here?"

"No, at my house."

The two men, both athletes, walked side by side down the street their elbows touching more than once and their tongues almost silent.

Colonel Centipede led the way to the little consultation room and pointed to a chair at the table.

"Captain Burt," said he, "do you recall the conversation we had here six months ago?"

Blonde Burt looked into the face across the table and shook his head.

"We talked about the old Sonora Mines of La Paz—the ones which I told you could be turned into bonanzas with the right man at the helm."

"I recall that now," was the answer.

"Well, I've come back to the subject. The papers which I drew up then I shall utilize now, and the man whom I send out to work the mines shall have the lion's share, as we said then. When can you start?"

The suddenness of this question seemed to take Blonde Burt's breath.

"When can I go?" he cried, amazed.

"Yes. You were given control of the La Paz bonanzas six months ago."

"I believe you did confer that honor upon me."

"Certainly, and you said: 'When you want to send me out, speak the words, colonel.'"

"I don't dispute you, but I thought—"

"Hal you thought what, Captain Burt?"

"Really, I thought you had disposed of the Sonora Mines, or something of the kind."

"I don't sell fortunes," rejoined Colonel Centipede laughing inwardly over the trap which had caught the blonde sport of Arizona—sport and rival as well. "If you could set out at daylight to-morrow."

"I cannot."

A deepening red suffused the San Satano nabob's face.

"I thought you offered your services at any time," said he.

"That was six months ago."

"But does that length of time break your word? I must hold you to your promise. I will trust the La Paz Mines in no other hands. I know the man I am sending out to them and he knows how to make each one a bonanza whose fame shall kill the mine kings of Sonora with envy. I know what you would say, Captain Burt," and Colonel Centipede raised his hand in token of silence for the blonde sport was about to speak. "I am able to take care of myself against the Indian detective and his cunning. Have I not held my own all my life even against hunters as good as Silk Hand? You forget that I am not alone in the fight. The hunting hand of Queen Clara is with me."

A smile crossed the listener's face.

"She loses the Indian whenever she pursues him!" he remarked.

"The fox that eludes the hound eleven times

is run down in the twelfth," was the prompt answer. "Fate will bring the Indian back—fate goaded by the hand of vengeance. When he comes there will be no back down by fingers at the trigger as there was before in Juarez's lottery-shop. Don't fear to go to La Paz leaving me here to grapple with coming events whose shadows have already fallen. You forget the past. You have overlooked the trails that lie between San Satano and certain camps and cities. Go to the mine of Sonora, Captain Burt—go when the new day breaks. I will fight and win against a thousand red Vidocqs here."

Blonde Burt seemed to change to a statue of determination.

Had he seen through the cool scheme of the man before him?

At any rate, he replied:

"You must send another to the mines of La Paz, Colonel Centipede."

"What! do you refuse to go?" exclaimed the Arizona nabob starting forward and his hand at the same time dropped below the top of the table.

"I have a mine of my own that demands some attention."

"You!—Where?"

"It is not in the hot fever-cursed district of La Paz," returned Blonde Burt with a half malicious smile. "One's own business ought to be his first concern."

The man talked so coolly that Colonel Centipede thought his very audaciousness worthy of admiration.

"Do I understand that you flatly break the promise made in this room six months ago?" he asked.

"If my refusal to go to the twin mines in the Southwest is a breach of faith, it must be so taken."

Colonel Centipede sprung to his feet like a Jack from his box.

"Then, by the eternal heavens! you sha'n't play your love game here!" he thundered.

There was a quick dash around the table by Blonde Burt—too quick for the rage-ruled nabob—and a hand with a grip like a vise's closed on his right wrist and shook a cocked six-shooter from his grasp!

CHAPTER XV.

A BID TOO LATE.

FOR a minute of silence the two men looked at one another with not more than two feet of space between their handsome faces.

The revolver loosened from Colonel Centipede's grip lay under the table. By the barest accident it had not been exploded by the fall, but it was beyond its owner's reach, and Blonde Burt had the upper hand.

"Understand, colonel," said the blonde sport, the first of the two to speak, "that six months ago is not now. If the La Paz bonanzas are dying to be opened, you have a dozen expert mine-bosses under your control. I prefer to go where my best interests send me. Blonde Burt of Arizona is his own boss. He wears the livery of no man, and no living being has a mortgage on his soul."

"That's all right if you wish it so," responded Colonel Centipede.

"I make it so!"

"Then remove your hand and keep your distance."

The threat that lay concealed in this command only provoked a smile from the man who heard it.

The next moment Blonde Burt's hand dropped from the colonel's wrist, and his figure moved across the carpet toward the door.

"May success attend the opening of the La Paz," he said, with his eyes still fixed on the man who was ill-naturedly swallowing his rage and chagrin. "Good-night, Colonel Centipede!"

Before the nabob could reply, he saw the snake-banded hat of Blonde Burt flit through the open door, accompanied by a pair of broad shoulders, and then he was alone.

"He suspected," said the colonel to himself, when he caught his breath, though his face was still as red as a fighting cock's comb. "I wonder if he expects to draw a line in the sand of San Satano and then ask me to keep on a certain side. He doesn't know the man he deals with, if he goes thus far. When I first referred to the Sonora mines to-night, I thought his eyes got a singular light, which grew stronger as I proceeded. He knows the prize in the game as well as I do, and by the saints! a fairer one was never played for by living man!"

Colonel Centipede was shrewd enough not to follow the man who had just left and renew the quarrel on the street or under the roof of the Double Dagger Hotel, where he always stopped when in San Satano.

This would not only widen the breach, wide enough already, but it would parade their rivalry in public and carry the news of it to Meda's ears.

"I am going to be master here—master in everything at that!" Colonel Centipede went on, even after he had cooled down and steadied his nerves. "He shall set up no rival kingdom, nor run an opposition bonanza. My hand is seen in every shade of San Satano's progress. I made

the town. I set it here in the valley at the edge of the desert not only because I knew gold was here, but because I wanted to rule where I would be safe. And now this man comes forward and says 'No!' I don't care what he has been to me in the past. I forget all that because he makes me forget it. The servant can't be master. Not where I am, at least."

Colonel Centipede soon afterward found himself on the street.

This time he avoided the Plaza, and going down the narrow thoroughfare where the shadows were long and dark, owing to the position of the moon, he knocked at the door of a house almost as good as his own.

"Ah! good-night, colonel!" exclaimed the man who let him in, and then the nabob of San Satano led the way to a small uncarpeted room. "Captain Goshen, I am here on business," began Centipede hastily. "I am going to give you a chance to leave Arizona, something which I happen to know you have long wanted to do."

"I've just found that chance," was the answer.

"Just found it? How?"

"I have sold the Heathen Chinese Mine."

Colonel Centipede was taken aback by this information.

"Well," said he, with a forced laugh, "it's all right if you've sold to the right party."

"The wrong party—wrong in my estimation—colonel, could hardly come. I sold the Heathen Chinese to Blonde Burt."

A bombshell seemed to have exploded in Colonel Centipede's face.

The very event he wanted to prevent had happened, and Blonde Burt had control of a weapon as powerful as any he could use.

The Heathen Chinese, owned by Captain Goshen, whose health had failed, had been for a long time a veritable Naboth's vineyard to Centipede. It was the rival of his best mine in the gold hills, that reached to the boundaries of the camp, but the high figures at which Goshen had insisted on holding it, had hitherto prevented a trade.

Now he was ready to pay the price, for the purpose of preventing his rival from setting up a formidable kingdom, where he had ruled with almost absolute sway.

He knew the meaning of a rivalry of the kind. He could foresee the results of Blonde Burt drawing around him a set of men who would match those he controlled himself.

Captain Goshen's men would pass in a body over to the new boss, and Blonde Burt would own them as he owned the ore and the tools of his new purchase.

It is no wonder that Captain Goshen's announcement of the sale staggered the man who heard it.

Blonde Burt had seen the importance of the purchase in more than a financial point of view.

The man who controlled the Heathen Chinese would be able to say something in the important affairs of San Satano.

He could face Colonel Centipede, and fight him, if fight they must, on nearly equal terms.

Captain Goshen had not been quarrelsome. A man with an incurable disease, he wanted to go away to die, he said, in the land he had left twenty years before.

"Is the mine actually beyond your power?" suddenly questioned Colonel Centipede, catching at a lingering hope that he might overthrow the sale.

"I regret to say that it is, colonel."

"What made him buy it?"

"I don't know."

"Did he ever talk about it before to-night?"

"Six or seven months ago he asked me what I'd take, and I told him. To-night, not an hour ago, he came in and inquired if I still wanted to sell. 'Yes,' said I. 'At the old price?' he asked. Again I replied in the affirmative, and his only answer was, 'Consider it sold.'"

"A quick bargain," rejoined Colonel Centipede.

"A godsend to Gideon Goshen," smiled the late proprietor of the Heathen Chinese. "To-morrow's sunset won't find me in San Satano."

"What about the men?" eagerly asked Centipede.

"Ninety per cent. of them will work for Blonde Burt."

A cloud of displeasure appeared to settle over the colonel's brow.

"I'm sorry on your account, colonel," proceeded Captain Goshen. "I always said I'd sell to the first man who offered my price, and if you had been—"

"It's all right," broke in the nabob, though his looks said plainly the very opposite. "I wish you a safe journey to the old stamping-ground; but, by the eternal, captain, I don't wish the new owner of the Heathen Chinese success. There! don't press me, please. If he plays another card as good as the one he's just thrown he'll find upon it the coolest trump he ever saw!"

Captain Goshen stood speechless in a spell of wonder for some time after Colonel Centipede had left the premises.

"I could see things working that way between them two, but I never thought it would drop a plum of this sort into my lap," he laughed to

himself. "I won't be here to witness the outcome, but it'll be worth looking at. The line has been drawn to-night by Blonde Burt, and Colonel Centipede will some day cross it. He can't help it."

Already the baffled boss of San Satano had put one-half the distance to his house between him and Goshen's quarters.

Once he stopped and looked toward the lights that marked the front windows of the Double Dagger Hotel.

He knew who was there.

"Why not?" he suddenly exclaimed, and at the same time his hand moved to his pocket. "This time there would be no caught wrist. The advantage is with me in spite of the sale just made."

He took half a dozen steps toward the hotel, but as suddenly as he had started in that direction he stopped and went back.

"Not now! Let him smile over his first play. Captain Burt, I am as much master of San Satano now, as I have been. And you nor no living man shall shake my authority or win the beautiful prize of this game."

He went home shutting his door madly behind him and drank in silence to his own success and Blonde Burt's discomfiture.

"I can do one thing," he said, inspired by a sudden thought. "There is a play which I can make now. It may cost a life, but what's a life with so much at stake?"

He crossed the room and jerked a cord that hung along the wall.

He then waited five minutes when the room was entered by a young man not past twenty. He touched his hat in the middle of the room and awaited orders.

"Jason, do you know that Captain Goshen has sold the Heathen Chinese?" queried Colonel Centipede, watching the lights and shadows on the youth's face.

"Yes, colonel."

"Who told you?"

"Big Whittlesy. Blonde Burt is treating the Heathen Chinese's men at the hotel."

"Are all there?"

"Whittlesy said they were. Why didn't you buy it? We thought—"

"Never mind," put in Colonel Centipede. "Do you know the trail to Dos Lopedo?"

The youth started.

"I could find it," he answered.

"Of course. You cross the desert first."

"And take the Wayback trail after that."

"Yes, yes. Well, Jason, say nothing to any one, but bring Rocket to the back door, with yourself armed and equipped. I will have the message ready by that time."

The young man touched his hat the second time and fell back.

"By the way," said Centipede, stopping him. "Do you know Cactus Clara, the Queen of the Desert?"

"I know her."

"That is all, Jason. You are the very man I want for this business," and when the youth had departed, Colonel Centipede struck the table with his fist.

"Turn about, Blonde Burt! When somebody comes to San Satano you'll find all the trumps in the enemy's hand. Jason will find her. I ask no more."

The next moment he was writing the message which was to cross the desert.

CHAPTER XVI.

DESPOILED.

BLONDE BURT'S purchase of the Heathen Chinese Mine was a genuine surprise to San Satano.

At first rumor the trade was discredited, but the blonde sport affirmed it in the bar-room of the Double Dagger Hotel where, with a smile at his lips and eyes twinkling with victory, he treated the crowd.

He told them that he wanted to "settle," but several of those who listened, the keen observing ones, fancied that they saw a hidden meaning to the speaker's words.

Those who had watched the growing regard of Blonde Burt for the fair young girl whose life was a mystery, and the ones who had detected Colonel Centipede's glances thrown in the same direction, felt that the two men had come face to face as rivals.

In one corner of the bar-room, while Burt leaned on the counter and hinted at his future plans to the inquisitive crowd, stood almost unobserved a youth whose face was pale but whose eyes were very bright.

He watched the Southwest dandy with a look of close attention, and eagerly drank in every word that dropped from his tongue.

Blonde Burt did not seem to see this interested auditor, but when the new owner of the Heathen Chinese ceased to amuse the crowd he walked straight to the corner where the pale-face was.

"Do you want a job?" he asked the young man.

The youth started.

"You are strong enough to keep mine records, ain't you?" continued Burt.

"I think I am."

"Well, I want a keeper. Captain Goshen's

secretary is going away with his master. I believe you kept the records for the Jumping Jupiter in Wayback?"

"I did."

"Then you know all about it. How much did you get?"

"For the service?"

"Yes."

"One hundred a month."

"I'll add fifty to it," said Blonde Burt, quickly. "Is that satisfactory?"

"Yes—"

"Consider yourself the record-keeper of the Heathen Chinese. Come down to Captain Goshen's old office at eight to-morrow morning. The books will be handed over and explained by his secretary. You have a friend here, haven't you? He came up from Wayback."

"Golden? Yes, he is here."

"If he wants work send him to me."

The young man's face got a pleased expression.

"Thank fortune, I'm not going to lose Golden!" he said to himself, and in another moment he was alone again.

"I don't quite understand this," he went on, but if he could have heard Blonde Burt's estimate of his action some light might have been thrown upon the puzzle.

"Two good plays in twenty-four hours ain't so bad!" the sport of Arizona laughed, to himself. "I'll have you where I can watch you, Louis, and Golden will be there, too. You took the bait at first sight and now you can't escape. You came up from Wayback with Juarez's knife-stab hardly healed to serve the Indian detective and to be near some one else. I see through your removal, Louis, but the day you cross my territory will be one you will never forget."

Louis of Wayback left the Double Dagger in a strange state of mind.

He went to a weatherboarded cabin in which, by a dim light, a man leaned from a stool against the wall and appeared to be sound asleep.

Leaning toward this man, who had a bronze face, covered with a fine dark beard, the youth touched him on the shoulder.

"Golden, we've got a job," said Louis, as the big man started up.

"A job? Of what sort?" he cried.

"Blonde Burt has employed me and wants you."

Golden's eyes grew full of astonishment.

"Blonde Burt, eh?" And he seemed to regard Louis's words in the light of a joke for a moment.

"Yes, I'm his bookkeeper and—"

"Where's his mine?"

"He has just bought the Heathen Chinese."

"Old Goshen's bonanza!"

"The same."

Golden, the miner, made no reply for several seconds.

"There's something behind this—something sinister, Louis," he resumed.

"What can it be, Golden?"

"Give me a chance to grasp it. Blonde Burt, who is Cactus Clara's friend—the long-time pard of Colonel Centipede, ain't going to get a mine, and hire you—put you in a place where you can be watched—"

"Heavens! do you think there is a conspiracy of this kind afoot?" broke in Louis.

"I don't say there is. I was just remarking that a man of Blonde Burt's shrewdness would not do all this without there was something at stake—something bigger to him than the Heathen Chinese."

"What is it, Golden?"

The big miner shook his head.

"But what shall I do—back out of the bargain?"

"No, no!" exclaimed Golden.

"And what will you say when he offers to take you?"

"I'll step into the traces and become one of his men, but," with a laugh, "at the same time, Louis, I'll be Golden just as I have been. We can serve the cause by going into this arrangement. We can help both Silk Hand and Meda; but I say in advance, boy, there'll be spies at our heels. But they must not go too far. I'll draw the line and they must not cross it."

For some time longer the two pards discussed the new state of affairs in the cabin.

They did not see the solitary horseman who rode secretly from San Satano and who at the boundary of the town turned his stud's head toward the desert.

The face of the rider was youthful—almost boyish—but he sat the saddle well and kept a firm grip on the lines.

He carried beneath his coat a message just written by Colonel Centipede. It was addressed to the woman known as the Queen of the Desert, and the messenger was instructed to find her with as little delay as possible, but not to return until he had delivered the letter.

The boy may have wondered why Centipede had become so anxious to communicate with Cactus Clara.

It seemed to him that Blonde Burt's unexpected purchase of the mine had something to do with his present journey. He could not disas-

sociate the two events, and while he galloped across the sterile waste this thought came back to him more and more.

Jason, the young messenger, had before him a journey he did not relish.

He knew that the desert had its pests as well as the mountain trails.

There would be no vultures at night, and no hot sun to beat down upon him with the heat of a furnace blast.

He was Colonel Centipede's rider when riding was to be done, and the whole camp knew that he sustained the relation of messenger to the boss of San Satano.

The colonel had instructed him as to his route.

He was to ride first to Wayback and thence southward to Dos Lopedo.

In the neighborhood of the last-named place, if not within its very precincts, he was likely to find Cactus Clara.

The message was not to be got to her second-handed.

It was to be placed in her hands by the messenger himself.

There was to be no failure—the business was too important for that.

Jason rode forward across the open, keeping his horse at a good gallop as if anxious to put as much distance as possible between himself and San Satano in a given time.

His horse's hoofs gave out no sound in the mixture of sand and clods at his feet.

A man could cross the desert in utter silence. It has been done.

Jason looked back a number of times but the lights of San Satano had already faded and the shadow of the clouds that flitted across the disk of the moon seemed to play hide and seek on the ground.

All at once the young messenger thought he saw a moving object on the trail he had followed.

He reined in his steed and tried to sweep the dim monotonous landscape behind him.

But he had already lost the object if indeed he had ever detected it, and again he went on.

Some distance from the place of his halt he again looked back.

The moon was now shining on a stretch of sand far in his rear, while his horse stood in the cloud's shadow.

Suddenly something moved on the light spot. This time there could be no mistake.

Some one was coming up. Jason would not have cared if he could believe that the approaching person was a traveler like himself.

He wanted company across the desert.

Colonel Centipede had cautioned him to make no strange friends, but the man of San Satano would never know the difference if he should lighten his trip over the treeless plain.

Jason was almost tempted to wait until the unknown came up.

The shifting of the cloud had caused him to lose sight of the trailer, but he could imagine him coming on in the swinging gallop peculiar to the rider of the Southwest border.

But Jason moved forward again, looking back every now and then, but among the light and shadow of cloud and moon seeing nothing more of the mysterious rider.

All of a sudden, however, the Unknown burst upon Jason's vision with startling power.

Horse and rider appeared for a second hardly fifty yards away, then another cloud sweeping over the moon blotted them out as it were.

Jason the messenger laid his hand on his revolver, drew it and held the weapon in a position from which it could be leveled in a twinkling.

Then he stopped and waited.

His heart beat wildly against the letter he carried in his bosom.

Friend or foe? That was the question.

The shadow of the cloud did not long conceal the stranger.

The silver disk in the heavens suddenly burst forth again in all its brightness, and at that moment a horse landed his rider alongside the nabob's messenger.

Then Jason saw that the face of the Unknown was masked.

A black domino completely concealed the features and the hand at the lines was gloved.

"There!" said a voice behind the cloth. "Don't lift what you've got in your hand," and the form of the Unknown bent toward Jason. "I want what you carry next your heart, young man. Come! don't let me take it from a dead man. I know what you carry and I want it."

Colonel Centipede's messenger fell back, but not beyond the stranger's reach. That he could not do.

One of the hands of the Unknown rested on his wrist, the other gripped a cocked revolver.

"My life is worth more to me than the letter is," passed through Jason's mind. "I cannot go back if I give it up, but I can get beyond Colonel Centipede's vengeance."

His hand moved toward his bosom and drew forth the message the seal of which the robber glanced at in the moonlight before he thrust it into his pocket.

"That's better than giving the vultures a feast!" laughed the Unknown, falling back.

"If you show your face to Colonel Centipede you will be shot dead in your boots."

"I know it," replied Jason.

"If you take the risk and by the merest chance escape the penalty, recollect that I may see you later."

Jason did not hesitate in his response.

"I've seen San Satano for the last time," said he.

CHAPTER XVII.

SOMEBODY COMES BACK.

FOR several days affairs between the pronounced rivals of the Arizona town moved with unwonted serenity.

Captain Goshen, the late proprietor of the Heathen Chinese, had made his promise good and gone away.

The mine had passed completely into the hands of Blonde Burt, and work in it was being pushed along as usual.

Nobody not in the secret of the sale—a secret it was no longer—would have suspected that the bonanza had changed hands.

There were few new faces about the premises.

One of the few was to be found in the small, well-built house with heavy shutters that stood near the mouth of the mine.

It was the office of the secretary of the bonanza and there Louis was to be found keeping the Heathen Chinese's accounts.

He rather liked the work.

It was not irksome, and he liked figures and wage accounts besides.

"What did I tell you, Louis?" asked Golden, as he stopped at the secretary's door the second morning after their engagement with the blonde sport.

"What did you tell me, Golden?"

"You haven't forgot already, boy?"

"You've told me many things of late."

"I'm talking about the scheme back of our engagement."

"Ah! You did say there was something sinister behind it. I recall it now, Golden. You have not changed your mind?"

A smile played on Golden's bronzed face for a moment.

"If you had my eyes and my chances you wouldn't change your mind either."

"What have you seen?"

Golden dropped his voice as he leaned toward Louis who no longer saw the page before him.

"Spies!" said he. "Spies here and spies there."

"On us, Golden?"

"Not so much on me as on you, boy."

"On me?"

Louis's face grew suddenly white.

"There! don't show that I've told you anything," continued the faithful pard. "We fell into the trap pretty slick, and kicking won't let us out. I thought all the time that Captain Burt wanted you where you'd be visible at all hours."

"Then, by heavens, I don't serve him another minute!" cried the young man.

"If it is a scheme—"

"Not another word! Yonder comes the master with an Indian."

"An Indian?" echoed Louis.

"A copper-colored fox if I'm not mistaken. I wonder if he's bringing him to the mine?"

Golden started off and vanished in a moment.

In a little while Louis, who had gone back to his books, heard a step at the door, and he looked up to behold Blonde Burt.

The handsome sport was not alone.

He was accompanied by an Indian who wore the half-civilized garments of the wild borders, and Louis could not help admiring his perfect physique, his broad, dark shoulders, and his leonine arms.

The Indian wore his dark, straight hair artistically plaited down his back, and the new secretary thought how different he would look if it was not confined at all.

"Louis, this is Red Arrow, a member of the Mohave Nation on the 'fenced-in lands,'" spoke Blonde Burt. "I'm going to put him in the mine, and I've brought him here to make you somewhat familiar with his face. You may dedicate a page of the pay ledger to him, and I'll take him down and give him a pick."

Louis took up his pen and turned the leaves to a blank page.

"What is your name?" he asked the Indian.

"Red Arrow."

"A Mohave?"

The red-skin slightly ducked his head.

The young man wrote the name with a flourish, and when he looked up again, he saw the Indian's plaited hair as he stepped from the office.

It was not an uncommon sight to see Indians among the mines.

Louis remembered several who worked in the Jumping Jupiter at Wayback City. They never became skilled miners, however, their unsocial disposition drew them into quarrels with their companions in the shafts, and bloody affrays between red and white had marked the development of more than one bonanza.

Meantime, Blonde Burt and Red Arrow had gone into the Heathen Chinese.

The Indian was observant, but silent.

Colonel Centipede's rival took him into a chamber where twenty men were at work.

The moment the miners observed the red-skin, they frowned their displeasure.

"No Greasers hyer!" they whispered to one another. "We don't want 'em, an' we won't have 'em!"

Blonde Burt appeared to take no note of looks and muttered curses.

He went to one corner of the chamber and lifted a pick which he placed in the Indian's hands.

"He's hired him sure enough," growled the men. "Captain Goshen would never have thought of doing this. But wait! we'll make it hot for the red Chinese!"

Captain Burt escorted the Indian from the place, down an underground corridor and presently halted in a part of the mine that seemed entirely cut off from the main galleries.

"I've brought you a new man, Dickson," said Blonde Burt addressing one of three men who worked here.

"Ho! an Injun, eh?" answered the fellow who bent forward at sight of Red Arrow.

"Red Arrow the Mohave," replied the bonanza sport. "Set him to work where you think best. You'll find him strong enough and all that—a workman who will be worthy of his hire if he is red."

A minute afterward Dickson the mine-boss stood alongside the Indian.

"You can work over yonder next to Golden," said he, pointing to a stalwart man whose figure was visible in the light that emanated from a torch lamp ingeniously fixed to the wall. "I guess you two won't quarrel; but if you do you'll have to fight it out. That's the rule of the mine."

Red Arrow received these words in silence and walked to the place assigned him.

Golden stepped aside to give the pick in the Indian's hands full swing. He had no scruples against being the work-fellow of a red-skin. He had worked with them before and he had seen them to better advantage than cooped up in a gold-mine toiling like the white serfs there.

Red Arrow swung the pick with the ease of one well used to it.

"This red is no tenderfoot," thought Golden, whenever he glanced at his companion. "He is shaped like Silk Hand the detective, at least I think the ferret has a fine physique like Red Arrow's."

The day passed with the Indian sticking nobly to his post.

When Dickson jerked the cord that sounded the quitting signal throughout the mine, he threw down his pick and looked at Golden.

"How does Injun work?" he asked.

The big pard smiled.

"You've worked underground before," said he.

"White man think so?"

"I do."

Golden thought that Red Arrow's eyes got a pleased twinkle, but he was not sure.

The two passed up together without another word between them, though their elbows touched a dozen times on the way.

Red Arrow found many a scowling face at the mouth of the mine. The men had congregated there to show him by look and innuendo that they wanted no Indians about.

He looked at the crowd with the Indian's expression of immobility.

"One week and a midnight noose!" growled one man. "Why not send him back to Mohavedom afore that?"

"Mebbe we will! He can't pick up dollars in the Heathen Chinese to spend away from here. This is a white man's town—no Injuns, no John Chinamen, no nonsense!"

Red Arrow heard every word of this.

It had been spoken for his benefit, and the applause told how the crowd stood.

The Mohave miner singled out the speaker by a rapid glance, but he made no reply.

"He's marked you, Grimshaw," laughed several men.

The miner echoed the merriment, and shook his fist at the departing Indian.

"I don't go back on a word of it, boys," he exclaimed. "No Injuns, no Celestials, and no nonsense! Them's the three n's of San Satano!"

Red Arrow kept on walking proudly erect until his form disappeared.

Only the deafest person could have missed hearing the last words, and it was certain that Grimshaw's blast had reached the very ears for which it was intended.

Golden saw and heard all this.

"They won't stand the Injun," thought he. "For his own good he'd better throw up the job and get away. If I get a chance I'll post him, but the man who does this is apt to get himself into trouble. I haven't been here long, but I know what Growling Grimshaw is. Red Arrow is marked—mebbe for the noose, mebbe for the vultures. But he's marked—and for death, too."

Golden stopped at the secretary's office as he went up from the mine.

Louis was there.

"Just how to get at the Injun, that's what

puzzles me," said Golden, when he had talked the matter over with the young secretary. "I don't want to see a lot o' men o' my kind choke a chap just because his skin's red."

"They must not do it, Golden!" cried Louis, with a touch of feeling. "My best friend—the man on whom so much depends—justice, vengeance, and all that—is an Indian. What is more, he is the tribal brother of Blonde Burt's new miner—a Mohave. For Silk Hand's sake, we must put Red Arrow on his guard. He must go away."

"But he won't!" broke in Golden quickly. "That is, he's not likely to be driven off from the look of his eye. I'll get a word with him to-night in spite of the risk."

"Do."

At this very moment, a man who had the gliding step, the willowy figure, the deceiving face and the keen eye of a born spy, entered a room occupied by Colonel Centipede.

"Well, Vallert, what do you know?" asked that worthy.

The spy leaned over the colonel's table.

"Blonde Burt has hired an Indian."

"Ha! I know that," smiled the nabob.

"He calls himself Red Arrow."

"Yes, and he is a Mohave."

"But that isn't what I've discovered. Red Arrow is the Indian who drew Juarez's last big prize."

"What?"

"He is the red ferret called Silk Hand!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

GRIMSHAW'S FATE.

COLONEL CENTIPEDE'S amazement was not one whit assumed.

He had never questioned the correctness of the reports made by this man, who was a born spy, and who had served him well.

It was Vallert's business to discover as soon as possible the true calling of all strangers in San Satano. If they came disguised, he was to ferret them out and report their identity to his master.

On a former occasion he had singled out the Tall Mesquite from San Bardo; but the Indian had eluded closer scrutiny by going off in a manner known to the reader.

Now, Vallert of the keen eye had rediscovered the Mohave Ferret, or, at least, such was his report.

"So he has come back?" exclaimed Colonel Centipede, speaking through his teeth.

Vallert bowed.

"Does Blonde Burt suspect?"

"No."

"Nor Louis the secretary and his pard?"

"I am sure they do not. But a storm is brewing," continued the spy.

"Ha! on the red miner's account?"

"Yes."

Vallert then went on to detail the feeling among the men of the Heathen Chinese bonanza over Red Arrow's employment.

Centipede's eyes got a pleased twinkle as he proceeded.

"It is a storm, sure enough," said he. "I don't want to be seen in the affray, Vallert, but the sooner the thunder-cloud breaks over the Indian's head the better. You understand?"

"I think I do."

"Grimshaw, as the leader of the hostile party must not abate any of his hostility," the colonel went on.

"He's not likely to do that," grinned Vallert.

"The man hates Injuns."

"He must hate this one more than any others, Vallert. He must carry out his spite in a summary manner. Growling Grimshaw should receive all the encouragement he needs."

"Two-thirds of the mine is at his back now."

"Good! Can you get a note mysteriously to Grimshaw?"

"When?"

"Right away."

"I can."

Colonel Centipede leaned toward the table and took a piece of paper from its drawer.

Vallert the spy watched him closely while he wrote. For a moment the pen flew rapidly over the paper, and when it stopped this had been produced:

"GRIMSHAW:—The red miner who is taking money from you and your pards has two names, and is here for a double purpose. Have you gone back on your motto: 'No Injuns, no Chinese, no Nonsense?' Be a man! And the sooner you show your manhood, the better. A FRIEND TO JUSTICE."

Vallert, who read the notice with a smile as it came fresh from its author's mind, saw that it was not in Colonel Centipede's usual chirography.

Of course the boss of Arizona was not going to take any chances in placing his own handwriting in the hands of the enemy. He had purposely disguised it for the underhanded play now to be made, and felt that it would stand every test.

Vallert folded the message and put it away.

"Get it to Grimshaw immediately," continued the colonel. "If he is not at home, as he is not likely to be at this time, place it on his table and then see that he goes home soon. Grimshaw

only needs something of that sort. It will burst the thunder-cloud and discharge its contents on the Indian's head. And we won't appear in the play at all Vallert, ha, ha!"

A minute afterward the spy touched his hat and departed.

"Still on the trail, I see!" cried Colonel Centipede. "Cactus Clara missed him, and he is here once more. She won't be long behind him if Jason finds her soon; but I shall have played one of my hands before she comes. The Indian has put on his last mask if there is anything in the hatred of fifty men led by an irreconcilable like Grimshaw."

Meantime Vallert, true to the calling that fitted him so well, had gone about the new business in hand.

He found the shanty occupied by the leader of the mine mob empty. More than this, the door was not locked, and he had but to press the latch to cross the step and carry out his master's plans.

Vallert was not a minute in Grimshaw's cabin, but he remained long enough to deposit on the table the letter written by Colonel Centipede.

This done, he glided out, closing the door after him, and disappeared toward the Plaza.

Almost the first voice he heard when he entered the bar-room of the Double Daggers was that of the very man he sought.

"The heaven is working," thought the spy. "This would do the colonel good," and then he listened to Grimshaw's tirade against Indians generally.

The head malcontent of San Satano, a giant in bronze with a hard, merciless face, stood a step from the counter and addressed an approving crowd.

He mentioned no names, but it required no particular discernment for one to guess whom he meant.

"The Injun who comes and takes the bread out of a white man's mouth is fit only for the noose!" growled Grimshaw. "The crowd that'll stand such proceedings ought ter have no bread. No Injuns, no Chinese, no nonsense!" And the iron fist of the speaker struck the counter with the force of a sledge-hammer.

The crowd broke forth into shouts of approval. "The wind blows from the right direction," murmured Vallert. "Now, if I can but get Grimshaw home!"

For a few moments longer the giant of San Satano talked in the same strain, when all at once he turned and walked toward the door.

"I'm going home," said he to the mob. "Wait till I come back and I'll show you something."

Going home!

What could have been luckier for the plans of the nabob of Arizona?

Grimshaw's figure passed from the hotel followed by Vallert's gaze until it disappeared.

He could picture Grimshaw's reception of the note, for he doubted not that it still remained on the table.

Ten minutes passed and the Indian-hater did not return.

Vallert, who expected to see Grimshaw rush into the bar-room with the letter above his head, was disappointed.

The crowd grew uneasy.

By and by Vallert stole from the hotel and hurried toward Grimshaw's cabin.

The door was shut and the front of the structure was in shadow.

Casting a furtive look about, Vallert went inside. He and Grimshaw were old acquaintances though the giant knew that he was Colonel Centipede's spy.

Suddenly, a few feet from the door, Vallert's toe struck something on the floor.

He stooped and felt with his hands, for the interior of the cabin was dark.

"My God! there's a dead man here!" yelled from Vallert's throat, and the following moment he struck a match and waited for the flame to rise with bated breath.

It did not take long for the spy to see the upturned face of a man on the floor—a man who lay on his back with one of his hands clinched and a bit of paper visible between the dark fingers!

Vallert drew back from the sight with distended eyes.

Grimshaw was dead!

"They must not see me here! They'll find him soon enough!" exclaimed the spy, putting out his match and springing up. "This seals the Indian's doom beyond peradventure. If he is fool enough to remain where he is another hour, he will feel the choke of the lynchers' noose. He didn't look over his shoulder for nothing at Grimshaw to-night. The boys were right when they told their leader that the Injun had marked him."

Vallert, once more in the street, looked in every direction, with the utmost caution.

He caught a glimpse, or thought he did, of a figure that flitted out of sight around a cabin a few yards away, but he did not follow.

He went back and crossed the Plaza.

The men at the hotel were still waiting for Growling Grimshaw.

A smile played with Vallert's lips a moment

while he thought of them, and of what would follow their wait.

"The thunder-cloud will burst within the next hour," muttered the spy, and then, quickening his steps, he entered Colonel Centipede's quarters.

"What is it now? You have some news," was the greeting that met Vallert in the little audience-room.

"News? I should say I have news," replied the spy. "The unexpected has happened."

"What! Is the Indian gone?"

"I don't know."

"Does Grimshaw refuse to proceed?"

"Grimshaw will never lead another mob."

"Is he dead?"

"He is dead!"

Colonel Centipede looked strangely into the face of his spy for a moment.

"I recall what you told me about the scene at the mouth of Blonde Burt's mine, after working time," said he. "The Indian overheard Grimshaw's hot sentences. You said that he gave him a quick look out of the corners of his eyes. The sequel shows that the Mohave couldn't keep his temper."

"I think so," answered Vallert, and then he gave an account of his visit to Grimshaw's shanty.

He had barely reached the end when a loud pounding was heard on the front door.

"It has come—the first reports of the storm, I mean," smiled the spy, as Colonel Centipede sprang up.

The next moment the door was opened, and a tall, dark-shirted man stepped into the room.

"There's murder in San Satano!" cried he, addressing Centipede, who waited for him with eagerness.

"So I have just heard," rejoined the colonel, glancing at Vallert. "What are they doing now?"

"They are going to hang the Injun what took a pick in the Heathen (Chinee to-day)!"

"Is he accused?"

"Yes."

"And arrested?"

"And arrested!"

"What does he say?"

"He denies the whole thing, but a thousand oaths of innocence from him won't save his neck."

"What says Captain Burt?" asked the colonel, anxiously.

"Nobody has seen him since sundown."

Centipede started slightly.

"If he was here he couldn't save Red Arrow's life," the miner went on. "There's no doubt that he killed Grimshaw—no doubt of it, I say, though Meda has just come forward with a declaration that the Indian is innocent."

"What! Meda?" cried Colonel Centipede, losing color.

"I heard her face a dozen and say it five minutes ago!"

CHAPTER XIX.

WOLVES AT BAY.

BEYOND the doors of the San Satano nabob, and out on the Plaza was gathered the maddest mob that ever occupied the town.

The murder of Grimshaw had stirred the hot blood of more than one hundred men as it had never been stirred before.

There was but one sound rising above the crowd—a universal, mad, vengeful cry for Red Arrow's life.

Guarded by a dozen men who held cocked revolvers in their hands though they were not likely to use them against the mob, stood the object of all this escaping wrath.

He had the boarded front of one of the Plaza saloons at his back, and may have known that he could have dashed through the place, which was empty, and escape by the rear door to the mountains.

"Gentlemen," said one of the Indian's guards, "there must be fair play here."

"Did he give Grimshaw any?" came from twenty throats.

"Meda of the Desert says—"

"We've heard her! The girl may be mistaken!" was the sudden interruption which illustrated the temper of the crowd. "We'd like to know who would want Grimshaw's life but the red hound standing yonder."

During this brief and ill-tempered colloquy between his guards and the mob, Red Arrow opened not his mouth.

He looked at the men who scowled at him from beneath their big hats, and seemed to calculate how long it would be before they would make a dash for him.

Almost touching him on the left stood Golden, the young secretary's friend.

The stalwart citizen of Wayback had planted himself where he thought he could be of service to the Indian whom, as yet, he did not suspect of being Silk Hand the detective.

Looking on in breathless suspense Louis himself was near by; but he had not planted himself with Golden's firmness for he knew that to resist the Grimshaw faction would be to drop dead at the muzzle of its revolvers.

Red Arrow had spoken but once since his arrest and that was to deny that he had been in any way responsible for the miner's murder.

What more could he say?

He started from surprise when Meda came forward with her volunteer statement that he was not guilty.

He looked into the girl's face a moment and then dropped his eyes.

She spoke with candor and firmness as she stood before a dozen of Grimshaw's friends, interposing her body between them and the Indians.

"You mean, miss, that you didn't just see 'im finish—Grimshaw, eh?" sneered one of the twelve.

"I mean that he did not kill him," she replied.

"Who did?"

Meda's lips came together and did not part in reply.

"I know your desire for the Indian's blood," she went on, after a pause of several moments. "You are bound to carry out the first part of the dead man's motto. But when you hang Red Arrow for the work of the knife in Grimshaw's shanty, you redden with the gore of the innocent another page of San Satano's history."

"Tell us who did it, girl, and we'll rend some one else!"

It was the same demand, couched in different language, and Meda met it in the same manner.

The scene on the Square had not changed for twenty minutes.

The same crowd faced Red Arrow and his guards, and the same parley went on between them.

It was a question which party would yield.

Vallert, the spy, came into the Plaza, and became a silent but interested looker-on.

"What would you do?" suddenly asked one of the Grimshaw men, who found Colonel Centipede's fox at his elbow.

Vallert's eyes got a quick glitter.

"I wouldn't let ten men keep back a hundred," he whispered, without turning his head.

"You wouldn't, eh?"

"No."

"Then go among the boys and tell 'em so."

But Vallert shook his head.

It was his duty to help the Indian to his doom without taking an active part in it. He could whisper to one man, but he must not advise a hundred.

Having answered the Grimshaw man, he fell back and vanished.

"What does the girl mean?" he said to himself. "She declares that the red is innocent, but refuses to denounce the guilty. What is her secret, if she really has one? I wonder if I can get at it?"

Vallert soon found himself in front of the little house with the vines over the door.

As if his footsteps had reached the ears of its tenant the door suddenly opened and he recoiled from the face of Meda the Unknown.

"What are they doing now?" asked the girl.

"What have they been doing ever since they arrested the Indian?" rejoined Vallert.

The girl smiled.

"They have but to rush forward and take him," the spy went on.

"He is guarded."

"By whom? By men who don't like Indians any more than do the Grimshaw faction. Not a shot would be fired by the red-skin's guards, and in a jiffy all would be over, the dead avenged, and the guilty punished."

Vallert looked closely at the girl while he finished his speech.

He saw a flush mount to her temples, and the last word was hardly off his tongue when her hand dropped upon his arm.

"That is your opinion, Vallert," said Meda. "You must remember that other people may have a different one."

He laughed half-scornfully as he replied:

"You have one, I understand, Meda."

"I have," firmly answered the girl.

"You call the Indian innocent."

"He is!"

"Did you see the blow struck?"

"I did not."

Vallert leaned against the cabin and by this means saw Meda's face in the best light to be obtained.

"If you have a secret that will save the innocent," said he, "justice demands that you should speak it. That's the way it looks to me. It is true that we don't value an Indian's life very highly, but it is as dear to the Indian himself as ours is to us. You say that the Mohave is not guilty. Don't you know that they are crying for his blood on the Plaza?"

"I know it."

That was all.

Did the girl see that Vallert's words had been adroitly put together not for the purpose of saving the Indian's life, but in hopes of drawing her out?

He was shrewd, was Vallert, the spy, and knew how to spread a snare that would catch a fox.

But he found his match in Meda of the Desert.

"The wolves don't always get all the blood they want," she replied, a smile appearing at her lips.

"But what will save the Indian if you don't come forward with the proof of your secret?"

"They won't take him from the guards."

Vallert fell back from the house, and let a derisive laugh ripple over his lips.

"You are a mystery—a puzzle, in more ways than one," he exclaimed. "You have been so ever since Colonel Centipede brought you in from the desert. Girl, you may owe the blank in your life to the Indian who is accused of killing Grimshaw. The desert is sometimes the red-skin's roving-ground, and his savage nature had reddened its sands with innocent blood."

"And so has the vindictiveness of white men!" flashed Meda.

"I see. You want Red Arrow to escape, but you don't want to deliver up your secret," remarked Vallert. "At any rate, girl, it bids fair to cost a human life."

"Red Arrow's?"

"Yes."

"It shall not do that."

Vallert pointed toward the Plaza.

"Then go down yonder and tell all you know."

For a moment the waif of San Satano looked toward the Square as if she were about to take the spy at his word, but she stepped back across the threshold of her little home and shook her head.

"She is bound to muddle things," growled Vallert, walking off disappointed and out of humor. "Already she has stepped between Colonel Centipede and his scheme. He has set his heart on the Indian's death, and why shouldn't he? If I stood in the colonel's shoes, knowing that the man under guard on the Plaza is the red ferret who is following a certain trail, picking up link after link in spite of Cactus Clara's hunt, I would not rest until I saw the red hand still and the keen eye dimmed! Look at the evolution of this scarlet Vidocq. First the Tall Mesquite from San Bardo, then Red Arrow, the Mohave, now Silk Hand, the ferret! If released—if he escapes—what next? What will be the next play? Who will feel the tightening of the noose at the end of the game? Silk Hand? No, no!"

A loud voice, seemingly down on the Plaza, quickened the steps of the spy.

In a moment he was on the scene.

"A truce until to-morrow," repeated the voice.

"No! no! No compromise with the red slayer!" was the response. "Let the men of San Satano remember Grimshaw's motto: 'No Injuns, no Chinese, no nonsense!'"

A wild responsive cheer that seemed to ascend from a thousand throats greeted the dead man's well-known battle-cry.

"It has come!" said Vallert to himself. "In a second Silk Hand the detective will be at the end of his trail."

"Don't rush things, men," the first voice replied, and the nabob's spy saw the tall speaker midway between the menacing mob, and its victim. "The Indian is willing to be tried for his life and before a San Satano jury at that. More than this: A white man offers himself as Red Arrow's security. If the Indian escapes the white man forfeits his life. Isn't this enough, gentlemen?"

"Where is the security?" asked a dozen men.

"We'd like to see the Indian's pard."

"He is here!"

The voice was clear but strange, and Vallert the spy, in his eagerness to see its owner, almost fell over half a dozen people.

"By Jove! it's the young record-keeper of Blonde Burt's bonanza!" he cried, after a second look, and then he fell back, looking still at the slight but handsome figure of young Louis.

CHAPTER XX.

THE DUNGEON OF THE DEAD AGAIN.

"WHAT did they do?"

Vallert was met with this question when he reappeared to Colonel Centipede after the acceptance of the human surety by the somewhat placated mob.

His answer was the brief story of the proceedings on the Plaza.

"The boy saved him, eh?" growled the Arizona nabob.

"For a time."

"Do you think they will let Grimshaw go un-avenged?"

"That set of men? Never!"

"Who heads the mob?"

"Doc Deadlock, the man from Colorado."

The reply apparently delighted Colonel Centipede.

"Does Meda stick to her declaration of the Indian's innocence?" he suddenly asked.

"She does."

"Whom does she accuse?"

"No one."

"Oh! she merely exonerates the red, eh?"

"That is all."

"That won't save him."

"Of course not. Unless he escapes to-night he dies to-morrow."

"Should he turn up missing, what, Vallert?"

"The young man forfeits his life."

"So he does!" cried Centipede, with a smile suddenly forming at his lips which were half-concealed by the handsome mustache he always wore. "What is the prevailing opinion? Will the Indian fly?" he added.

"He will stick."

"Vallert," said the nabob, bending toward his man who watched him closely. "I want the Indian to escape."

The spy started.

"To escape?" he echoed, but in different tones. "Not an hour ago you wanted him noosed by Grimshaw and his men."

"Yes, but men sometimes change their minds, and I've changed mine," was the answer. "The red-skin must go."

"But he will not. He never intended to run off and let the mob hang his security."

"But he must!" roared Colonel Centipede, striking the table with his fist. "Whether Red Arrow—or Silk Hand, if you like that best, Vallert—whether he wants to stay or not, he must be away before to-morrow."

The spy of the nabob looked at his resolute master, but said nothing.

"See here," continued the colonel. "Go out and send to me, one by one so as not to excite suspicion, Redlock, Baldwin and Merle."

"Yes, colonel."

"And come back yourself."

"All right."

"Find out first where the Indian is going to pass the night."

"It shall be done."

"I know it, Vallert; you never fail me."

Half an hour afterward in that same little room three men faced Colonel Centipede.

A few moments later Vallert came in.

Centipede looked the three stalwarts over from hat to boots before he approached the business of the occasion.

"Where is the Indian, Vallert?" he queried, throwing a quick look toward his spy.

"I left him in the shanty he took yesterday."

"Alone?"

"Alone."

"Now to the business before us, gentlemen," continued Colonel Centipede, looking at the patient three. "Are you in good enough trim to handle one man?"

The trio grinned, each man for himself, though they looked at one another out of the corners of their eyes.

"What! three against one, colonel?" asked Redlock.

"Yes."

"Where's the man who thinks we can't handle him?"

"I don't think he lives; but you have answered me. I want to beat the Blonde Burt party—to play a hand that will exasperate the whole set, and give us the laugh. You know that the purchase of the Heathen Chinese was made for the sole purpose of driving the iron into my flesh. Blonde Burt would set himself up in San Satano as a rival nabob. It is but one step toward an important assumption of authority which must be choked at the outset. Growling Grimshaw has been killed by some one." Colonel Centipede talked rapidly and warmed up with his subject as he proceeded.

"The general opinion is that the Indian whom he booted at the mouth of the mine paid him back in unexpected coin. The Blonde Burt crowd wants the red-skin's blood. It would have taken it to-night but for the parley and the compromise. The tigers have retired to sharpen their fangs for to-morrow. The Indian's escape would cover the whole gang with disgrace and chagrin."

"But it would cost a life, colonel," said Redlock.

"The boy's?" smiled Centipede. "Well, who is the boy? He is one of Blonde Burt's slaves, and, like his master, hates us and all we have in common. Louis, as he is called, is but an inter-lopers, and what is one life to us when we can get even with the would-be nabob of San Satano?"

"It is nothing," rejoined Vallert, speaking for the first time and taking his cue from a swift, sidelong glance by his master.

"The boy must not stop us," resumed Centipede. "The Indian must not be here when they want him to-morrow."

"Where should he be? On the desert?"

"Not there."

"In the mountains?"

"No."

Colonel Centipede seemed to reflect for a moment.

"There is a prison which can hold the Indian more securely than either mountain or desert," he went on. "If I am not mistaken the hands of Redlock helped to fashion it."

The eyes of the man addressed suddenly grew bright.

"I understand you," said he. "You mean the cell in the mine."

"The dungeon with the iron door," smiled Colonel Centipede. "Once there, the Indian will be safe from the mad mob of San Satano, and the powers of hell, though used by the Grimshaw faction, could not prevail against the portals."

"That is true," answered Redlock. "But once beyond the door, the Indian must remain."

"Certainly. We must beat the Blonde Burt gang to the last letter. Red Arrow must be placed forever beyond their power to shed his blood. The Indian is undoubtedly guilty though I know Meda says not. But let that pass, gentlemen. We aim our shafts against the man who would destroy us, and a blow at the mob sooner or later brings down Blonde Burt. The Indian must go to the cell in the mine! He might come back from the mountain or the desert; but with the iron key turned on him there can be no return."

The men looked again at one another and then waited for Centipede to conclude.

"The key is here," the nabob proceeded, taking the heavy and ponderous object from an inner pocket. "None of you need cross the threshold of the cell. The door can be guarded while the prisoner is pushed inside. Once beyond the portal, let it be shut on him and the key brought to me. Three men against one!" and Colonel Centipede admiringly looked the trio over once more, "and the three like you, gentlemen, ought to settle the matter in favor of the party of justice in San Satano. Send the key back by Vallert. Let the movement be a model of secrecy and success. The return of the key will be all the report I shall need."

The key was handed across the table to Redlock who covered it with his big hand, and the following moment the four men filed from the room leaving Colonel Centipede, and with a gleam of victory in his eye.

"I'm master yet!" he laughed. "It shall be two birds with one stone, too—the Indian and the boy. The man must be very blind who cannot see that Louis Nonsense came up from Way-back because Meda is here. At the crisis he throws himself between the Indian and the noose of the mob. Why? Does he know that Red Arrow is Silk Hand the Ferret? He must be in the secret, and that knowledge, boy, is what forfeits your life to-morrow."

Colonel Centipede showed in more ways than one within the next hour that he had achieved one of the greatest triumphs of his career.

He brought out the best wines his well-stocked sideboard contained and emptied glass after glass in self-congratulation.

There was one thing that seemed to give him some uneasiness, and this was the sudden departure of Blonde Burt.

Vallert, whose duty it was to see everything, could not tell when the rival sport had departed nor whither he had gone.

"Has he gone to solve the mystery that enshrouds Meda's life?" the colonel asked himself as he recalled the interview he had overheard at the window of the girl's home. "If so, he will leave it as deep as ever. It is not for the blonde sport to fathom, and despite his trails, it will remain in the possession of those who have guarded it so well."

Then, as if it was but a step from Meda to Jason, whom he had sent to the desert with the message for Cactus Clara, he laughed the next moment with the young rider's name on his lips.

"A spy like Vallert, and a messenger like Jason! Ah! who ought to fail with the most hazardous undertaking? Three days at the furthest will bring a living answer to my message. By that time Captain Burt will be back, and a hand not mine—mine will be in the shadow—will put a sudden end to his love-making. You've seen a good deal of the world, my cool one, but with all your knowledge of it, you are not able to cope with the man called Colonel Centipede!"

As the minutes passed that night, the Cræsus of San Satano—this man whose past life was to the men who served him an impenetrable mystery—remained in his house.

More than once he looked at a clock that ticked above the table, and noted the time with a good deal of impatience.

Once or twice he went to the door and looked out.

Beyond the step a singular silence had succeeded the reign of the mob.

What were his four tools doing?

Were they waiting for sleep to visit the eyelids of the Mohave?

It was verging on to midnight when a foot-step came toward the nabob's house.

He heard it distinctly, for he was at the door for the tenth time with his patience nearly run out.

"It is Vallert at last!" exclaimed Colonel Centipede.

Sure enough the following moment, while he looked at the door with anxious eyes, the long-expected spy came in.

There was a mixed light in the deep-set eyes that burned above the dark cheeks of Vallert, the sleuth-hound.

One hand went immediately to his bosom, and an iron key fell upon the table before Centipede.

It was caught up with a cry of delight.

"Was it well done, Vallert?" asked the colonel.

"I would call it so. The Grimshaw gang won't find Silk Hand to-morrow. They'll have to be satisfied with the boy."

CHAPTER XXI.

DEFEAT AND VICTORY.

THE reader may imagine amid what feverish excitement, sharpened by a merciless play for the mastery, one man at least of the many in San Satano waited for the new day, then not far off.

This person was Colonel Centipede.

He had dismissed Vallert, and was alone once more.

"It didn't take much thought—no, not much—ha, ha, ha!" he chuckled, tapping his table with his glass. "The brilliant scheme came to me all at once, and for me to think was to act. Corralled! Caught with his hand feeling for a new link in the chain he has been forging all these years. Who will say that Colonel Centipede, so-called, cannot turn and crush the viper at his heels? I will have a new secret for Cactus Clara when she comes. The man she has hunted falls into my net at the first spreading, and the skeleton in the dungeon has company after having been alone a long time!"

He laughed again—a laugh which he seemed to enjoy—and a few minutes later lay back in his chair, sound asleep.

While thus oblivious to his surroundings, thanks to the drowsy influence of the velvet wines he had imbibed, the handsome nabob of San Satano saw not the horse that entered the town from the desert side.

It was not uncommon for people not expected to come in from the waste of sand and parched grass, and the rider of the horse whose appearance told that he had crossed the cheerless space, wondered in audible tones if they looked for her.

She guided the animal into the main street and drew rein at the fringe of the Plaza.

Nobody welcomed her.

She looked round upon the busy dens of fortune, and saw figures moving beyond the bar-room windows of the Double Daggers.

"The man I want to see first I shall probably find at home," said she, and away she went again, halting no more until she sprung to the ground in front of Colonel Centipede's house.

The horse was tired enough to stand still without being tethered, and the woman leaving the lines on his neck, went up the steps and opened the door without ceremony.

She stole into the short hallway and turned the first knob to the right.

The moment she opened the door a flood of lamplight fell upon face and figure, and she saw—Colonel Centipede, asleep where we left him.

A smile came over the visitor's face while she stood on the threshold and studied the scene before her.

"It is no wonder!" she murmured, her eyes wandering from the nabob to the telltale articles on the table. "Too much shuts the eyes, just enough opens them. I will take just enough."

A velvet step crossed the room, and the fair hand of the Queen of the Desert poured a quantity of wine into one of the glasses.

Raising it to her lips with the movements of the toast-drinker, she glanced over the top of the glass at the unconscious colonel and swallowed its contents.

"At peace with the world—while he sleeps!" smiled Cactus Clara. "With the world against him when he is awake! Were I he, I don't know but that I would sleep all the time."

She bent over the table and touched the man in the chair.

It required more than a touch to break the wedded lips apart.

"Heavens! It isn't a dream for all!" ejaculated Centipede, staring at the beautiful woman for a moment, and then bursting into a joyful laugh. "Did Jason find you so soon?"

She gave him a return look of surprise.

"Jason?" she echoed. "Did you send the messenger?"

"I did."

"Across the desert?"

"Across the waste, with instructions to seek you first at Wayback, then at Dos Lopedo."

"Well, I missed your young Mercury. But what is the difference so I am here?"

"None at all. Indeed, you could not come too soon for me."

"Why not too soon, colonel?"

"I have one secret, if not two for you."

At this Cactus Clara opened her black eyes wider than ever.

Colonel Centipede helped himself to a glass of wine, probably this time as an eye-opener, and assumed a confidential air.

All the time he had the woman's whole attention.

"I sent for you to post you in regard to a bit of courtship in which I thought you might want to take a hand," he resumed.

"You mystify me," rejoined the Queen of the Desert. "It must be an important love affair, if I should quit the trail of the Indian for it."

Centipede thought of the prisoner in the dungeon of the dead and rubbed his hands gleefully. He would presently come to that which was secret Number Two, but none the less important than the other.

"You will call it important when I have mentioned it," the nabob went on. "Blonde Burt

has been playing high Jinks since he left you somewhere."

"He left me at Dos Lopedo; rigged himself out in full feather, and said good-by."

Cactus Clara spoke of the blonde sport with an indifference which did not reassure the man who listened.

"Well, he came up here in that toggerly," smiled Centipede. "And what do you think was the first thing he did?"

"Blonde Burt is apt to do the unexpected."

"That's just what he did—precisely! In other words, Queen Clara, he made love to Meda, the Unknown."

Colonel Centipede looked at the beautiful adventuress as if he expected to see her brilliant orbs catch fire with indignation, but they did nothing of the kind.

Instead of flushing up, her face did not change color, and her first response was a rich, indifferent laugh.

"Made love to Meda, did he?" she said.

"Well, there was no other siren in San Satano for him to dally with. Really, colonel, did you send for me to tell me this?"

The nabob colored like a boy caught at mischief. He grew redder than the wine in his bottles.

"I thought you would like to know of it," he stammered. "In fact, Queen Clara, you used to think a great deal of Blonde Burt—"

"But never enough to interfere with his love matters!" broke in the woman. "What care I to whom he makes love, so he don't interfere with my private affairs: Isn't the girl—your desert *protegee*—good enough for Blonde Burt? I should think you would want to get her off your hands. What is the other secret, colonel? You intimated that you had another."

The San Satano Croesus did not want to be driven from the first scheme thus.

He had believed that Cactus Clara was in love with the handsome blonde sport, and thought that all he had to do to array her against him and help his own plots, was to make her suspect that he (Blonde Burt) was false to her.

But the Queen of the Desert had pricked this bubble.

She had come back across the desert to laugh at his game, and say in so many words that Blonde Burt's love affairs were nothing to her.

It was torture to Colonel Centipede.

"We'll come to the second secret in a moment," said the colonel. "Let us dispose of the other matter first."

"Blonde Burt's love affair? I thought we had finished that. I don't care whom he loves. If Meda wants the fellow let her take him. If I had received Jason's letter and thought that it meant a discussion of Blonde Burt's courtship, I should have thrown it to the wind in a thousand fragments."

Her eyes fairly flashed and for the first time a flushed face confronted Colonel Centipede.

He could no longer fail to see the drift of Cactus Clara's passion.

"My God! I am the object of her love—I, and not Blonde Burt!" he thought. "There can be no misreading of that look. Why did I send for this tigress and fire her heart in this manner? But she came of her own accord, and now if she suspects the truth—if she sees through my little game—the girl, Meda, must look out."

"Let's have the other secret," said Cactus Clara, at this juncture. "You, of all men, ought to know that Blonde Burt, handsome as he is, could be nothing to me. Why, I would as soon fall in love with Juarez, the yellow dog whose face I am going to cut into strips one of these days!"

Colonel Centipede tried to conceal his deep chagrin, but it was no use. The woman across the table seemed to have fathomed his plans, for her eyes lost none of their glitter.

"I played a game of my own awhile ago," he remarked.

"In San Satano?"

"Here. But I must preface the story with a few words."

"Make them few."

The nabob gave the woman a brief account of the coming of Red Arrow to San Satano, the death of Grimshaw, the Indian's arrest for the murder, and the subsequent parley and postponement for one day.

"They won't hang the Indian, though," he said. "I saw a chance to play several scores with the same coin, and so I played the 'little game' I have referred to. I netted the Indian!"

"You did?" cried the woman, falling back in her chair.

"I robbed the mob! It was well done, too—the slickest trick on the San Satano calendar."

"I see. You helped the Indian, but doomed the boy—Louis—who put me upon Silk Hand's trail at Wayback."

"The trail you afterward lost," replied Colonel Centipede, with a show of sarcasm which the woman felt, for she seemed to wince.

"And the trail you could never find!" she retorted. "What became of the Indian?"

"He is keeping the dead company."

The woman's look became a quick, wild stare.

"What do you mean? Not—"

"Yes, that Red Arrow, who is Silk Hand the

Red Ferret, is now in the dungeon of the dead, locked in for life!" interrupted Centipede.

She did not speak for some time.

"I can't believe this," she answered at last. "I did not think that that Indian was ahead of me."

"He was. He always keeps ahead of you."

"I sent one of my desert rovers this way a week ago."

"I have not seen him."

"Perhaps not. He is a shrewd Indian named Red Pablo, and his mission was to keep track of Juarez, who was expected to decamp with the spoil of his last lottery. Can it be that you have really immured Silk Hand?"

"We have. There is no record on the wall, Queen Clara; I cut it out with my own hands. He will find the dead, but the secret will do him no good. To-morrow the mob will look in vain for Silk Hand."

"And rend the boy?" cried Cactus Clara.

A grim smile settled down on Colonel Centipede's face.

"He took the chances. He offered himself as bond with death looking over his shoulder. Let him face the music when it plays on the Plaza at sunrise. But you don't applaud my netting of the Indian trailer. He had picked up some good links of the chain, eh, Queen Clara?"

"So he had. I would like to see the red tiger."

"After ten days!" exclaimed Centipede. "Not for the wealth of Arizona would I unlock the dungeon before the end of that time."

There was no reply to this, but the Queen of the Desert looked as though the nabob had robbed her of a victory, to achieve which she had worked with all her cunning and strength for years.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE INDIAN IN THE MINE.

CACTUS CLARA created a little surprise at the Double Daggers Hotel when she walked into the rough-looking reception-room and asked for her old apartments.

More than one citizen of San Satano had often caught himself wondering what brought the Queen of the Southwest Desert to the camp in the valley.

It was said that somewhere on the more southern trails she commanded as cool a band as ever stopped a stage.

No one believed that her life had not been one of reckless adventure, plotting and criminal cleverness. She had the blackest eyes and steadiest hand along the border, and her favorite weapon of defense and attack—a razor-like whip—was seldom absent from her side.

Several faces, where she was best known around Dos Lopedo and Wayback, could testify to the virtues of the lash when wielded by her supple hand, and more than one man—so it was said—had come in from the desert cut to the bone by a whip that knew no mercy.

These victims of Queen Clara's ire never retaliated.

If pressed they would be forced to admit that they had insulted her in some manner, and though they threatened vengeance they never carried it out.

Colonel Centipede's coming to San Satano had been followed by the arrival of this strange and beautiful woman.

It was not to be doubted that the two had met before, but where none knew and no person was quite inquisitive enough to prosecute inquiries in that direction.

A bond of some kind existed between Centipede and the beauty of the desert. All could see this.

The nabob had a life back of the one he lived in San Satano.

He knew the topography of the Shasta Mountains like one who had prospected there. He was familiar with the location of gold camps which had been abandoned and several of his closest friends—he had no confidants, this Colonel Centipede—could say that he knew something of how prisoners are treated under the California law.

Where he and Cactus Clara had first met, how they had come together, and what circumstances had commenced their friendship—these were the three things San Satano knew little or nothing about.

To go back to the Queen of the Desert at the hotel, she got her old room and ascended to it alone.

"The colonel has played a game, sure enough!" she mused in the small apartment which did not look much like a lady's boudoir. "If he is not careful he will let out a secret he wishes to keep. Ha, Colonel Centipede, I see what you are up to. It is you who has been smitten, not Blonde Burt for whom I care nothing as I told you. What did I hurl back at the girl when I saw her last? I told her not to trespass on my preserves, didn't I? Well, she is there now, whether intentionally or not matters very little to me. Her mother was famous for 'breaking hearts' as they call it nowadays, though none are really broken. I see through the whole scheme as if nothing but gauze hung before it."

"I didn't come back a moment out of time. No, I am here when I am wanted. I will show the man who wants to bring down two birds with one stone how it is possible for not a feather to be touched. I thought you knew better, Colonel Centipede. Beware! Cactus Clara knows enough to open prison doors—enough to twist a noose for the neck you value so highly! What will they do to-morrow, did you say? Lose the Indian and hang the boy in his place? I must get the other side of this strange affair. Somehow or other I cannot think that Silk Hand—even if the prisoner be he—allowed himself to be netted by the colonel's spies. He was going louth when I lost him. Did he turn and ride for this place?"

The beautiful guest of the Double Daggers went down and out into the street.

"She got in in time for the drama to-morrow," remarked a big fellow who leaned against the counter when Cactus Clara passed through the room.

"Yes, and she'll take a hand in it, Long Jess," was the answer.

"Against the red?"

"Of course."

"Why, he won't have but two friends on the ground."

"Two, did you say?"

"The boy and pard."

"And the girl," smiled one of the men.

At this there was a general laugh which Cactus Clara might have heard for she was not far away.

"Ho! the girl's word can't help him. She merely says he didn't kill Grimshaw and thar she stops. I'd like to see a State's court that'd take testimony o' that sort."

This was the opinion of the whole crowd.

"If she'd go on and say how she knows the Injun didn't do it, it'd have some weight with the court," continued the man at the counter. "She can't think that by keeping her secret—if she really has one—she kin save Red Arrow's neck. Grimshaw's motto will be adopted by the whole camp after to-morrow, 'No Injuns, no Chinese, no nonsense!'"

Within five feet of the speaker, a smile at the corners of his mouth, half-hidden by an enormous sandy mustache, stood Redlock, the man who had just managed the incarceration of the Indian in the dungeon of the dead.

He could have given the crowd some startling information, which would have thrown some new light on the events of the coming day, but he kept his own counsels, and presently walked out, the smile still in its old place.

Redlock was not going to deliver up his secret. Meantime Cactus Clara, walking through San Satano, came to the door of a house with a lot of creepers over it.

It seemed as though she had singled out the place from among the many, for she knew where it stood, having crossed its step on a previous occasion.

She listened at the door for a minute, but no sounds rewarded her.

If Meda of the Desert was within, she was in the dark, and probably had sought her bed to sleep over the startling events of the last few hours.

At length Cactus Clara's hand went to the latch. She lifted it with a slight click, and then pushed the door open.

"Meda?" she asked, bending forward. "Meda of the Desert, are you here?"

There was no response.

The following moment Cactus Clara was clear inside, and again she spoke the name which had twice crossed her lips.

"Not at home, eh?" she laughed. "After what has happened, with Louis of Wayback in the shadow of death, and Silk Hand dead to the world though living, I should expect to find the girl elsewhere. This looks like flight. If she knows what has befallen the Indian, why has she not fled with Louis? This would be gall to Colonel Centipede, and his one stone would not bring down both birds!"

For several minutes the woman from the South stood in the wordless gloom of Meda's house.

It was evident that she was the only tenant at the time.

After awhile she went to the door, but halted there as if loth to leave.

"I can't find her by staying here!" she exclaimed. "I wanted to get the other side—her side—of this murder. I want her secret if she really has one. Does she know who killed Grimshaw if not the Indian? Meda of the Desert, you must give me your secret if I find you. You must, I say, or— Never mind! I am not powerless where Colonel Centipede is nabob and autocrat!"

Once more the adventuress found herself in the soft starlight which would soon fade before the first beams of the new day.

She stood undecided a little while and then started off toward the mines.

Nobody knew the intricate shafts and tunnels of Colonel Centipede's bonanzas better than Cactus Clara.

More than once she had threatened them, and fifty times at least had watched the miners at work for their taskmaster.

She went almost direct to the mouth of the Arizona Queen.

She had not entered it since he last visit to the secret dungeon on whose wall she and Colonel Centipede had discovered the last curse of the dead!

Now she was coming back alone—back to a spot which she thought she had deserted forever, and all because the cell held a living prisoner besides the dead one.

Cactus Clara took a mine-lantern from among many at the mouth of the main entrance.

With this for her guide she pushed ahead and found the heavy door that fitted in the rock like a stone in a wall.

A singular look brightened the woman's eyes for a moment.

She appeared to rejoice over the thought that the Indian detective whom she had followed so long and who had so often eluded her, was at the end of his trail.

The key of the dungeon was in Colonel Centipede's possession and would be well-guarded.

It had no duplicate, and the chisels and hammers of the Grimshaw gang could not force the door.

The woman from the desert threw the light of her lantern over the entire surface of the iron portal.

She leaned against it with one ear applied to the keyhole and for some minutes listened with her heart almost still in her bosom.

Not a sound came from beyond the iron door. Had Silk Hand the Mohave already perished?

She remembered that the former prisoner of the cell had lived for days within its walls, but then he had been fed.

Silk Hand would not be succored in any manner, and Centipede had declared that the heavy door should not swing outward for ten days.

Once or twice Cactus Clara thought of calling to the inmate of the cell, but she did not.

She wanted to tell him that the chain he had been forging would never be completed, and that her day of triumph had come.

"I'll come down here to-morrow after the trial," said she, drawing back. "Maybe there will be no trial now that the prisoner will be out of the way. If Louis remains there will be a rush by the Grimshaw mob, and some hot work for a minute. If Blonde Burt should come back and side with his secretary, or, if the miners should divide into two factions—one supporting the boy—San Satano may call to-morrow one of its reddest days. Either of these events may occur, but they can't be depended on."

Between the iron door and the shelf of lanterns the Queen of the Desert came to a sudden halt.

Over on her left, and where two passages crossed, another lantern, or a lamp, had flashed for a moment like a star.

Queen Clara turned her own light down and laid it behind her.

A moment afterward she moved toward the spot where the light had been seen, cautiously, almost on tip-toe.

For some time she saw nothing from where she had halted, but all at once some distance ahead a light flashed up, and she knew that a torch had been ignited.

The heart of the Desert Queen was in her throat. She saw the blazing fire as it grew larger and larger and tried to make out the figure seen now and then amid the smoke.

Suddenly she fell back with a cry that betrayed her presence there, for a lifting of the torch had revealed to her the holder, and she had seen the stalwart figure of an Indian!

CHAPTER XXIII.

TIGER BLOOD.

HARD upon Cactus Clara's exclamation of astonishment came two strange blows. Sparks, showers of them, flew in every direction, the torch was beaten out against the stone wall and darkness settled down in the corridors of the mine.

"It was Red Pablo, my spy on Jaurez!" said Clara when she recovered her breath.

"His prey must be near at hand, else why should I find him here? Juarez the One-Eyed has come back to San Satano and I may have the exquisite pleasure of slitting his yellow face before I go away. He heard me and beat out his torch. I must see him if possible. I have instructions for Red Pablo. With him to help me I can block this little love game of Colonel Centipede's and give the camp a new sensation."

She went down the tunnel toward the spot where she had seen the shower of sparks and stopped where they had fallen.

"Pablo? Pablo?" she called cautiously with her hand at her lips.

The echo of the name was all that came back.

"He is beyond reach of my voice," mused the Queen of the Desert. "If he had recognized me at first he would not have fled. When he discovers that I have come to San Satano we shall meet. Until then, Colonel Centipede, I may hold my return play in leash."

Cactus Clara went back through the corridors to the mouth of the colonel's mine and thence into the open air.

"The man who did the netting was Vallert," she said to herself. "He is Colonel Centipede's

spy and right-hand man, has a history himself like his master—a history which I know. Where will I find Vallert at this time? In bed of course."

Five minutes afterward the adventuress of the border pressed the latch of a shanty on one of the streets that struggled into the Plaza.

"Vallert, are you here?" she asked, stepping inside.

There was a movement in one corner of the room and a man sat bolt up-right on some blankets on the floor.

"When did you come?" he cried for he seemed to have recognized his visitor by her voice.

"I've been in some time. Are you thoroughly awake, Vallert?"

The spy bending forward to make sure of the identity of his visitor replied that his sleep was over for the night.

Then he slid into his pantaloons beneath the cover and lit a lamp.

For a moment he looked curiously at the Desert Queen as if he wondered what had brought her to his cabin, but he did not speak.

"Vallert, you made a big play for the colonel last night," began Clara.

"How last night?" rejoined the spy.

"It is morning, now, though the skies don't show it. I came to talk about your shrewdness. Did you have any trouble with him?"

"With whom?"

A smile fringed Cactus Clara's lips.

"Come, Vallert," said she, laughing, "you know there are few secrets between me and your master, and your work last night is not one of them. Did the Indian give you trouble?"

"Not much."

"How many were there of you?"

"Four."

"Where did you find him?"

"On the street."

"I don't see how you came to meet him so surely."

"It was real clever," grinned Vallert. "We had to look a good while for him after getting the orders. We made the rounds of the town several times, hunted high and low for him as it were. All at once Merle saw him creeping in from toward the mines. Heaven knows what he had been doing down there. We stationed ourselves at the corner of Noisy Nick's shanty, and when he came up something—it was a double poncho—dropped over his head and we had him fast. It took all three of us to hold him at first, but a little choking—Redlock's hands, you know—brought him round, and then we finished the work."

"Did you take him straight to the dungeon?"

Vallert looked curiously at his questioner for a second and then continued:

"Straight to the mine we went. By the time we got to the iron door, our catch was quiet enough, and when Redlock swung it back we rushed him in and dropped him in the darkness. He's there yet, Queen Clara, and the Grimshaw gang will have to be content with the lamb instead of the wolf when the hour comes."

Colonel Centipede's spy waited for the beauty of the border to speak when he had concluded his narrative.

"The door was locked when you had imprisoned Red Arrow, was it?" she asked.

"Yes, Redlock did that, and immediately passed the key to me. I took it straight to the colonel and that's the last I've seen of it."

"Vallert, are you sure that your prey was not dead when you left him in the dungeon?"

"No, he was not dead."

"Insensible, then?"

"Yes. Redlock's grip did the business."

For some moments no other words passed between Clara and the spy.

She may have thought of the Indian she had seen in the mine, but whether she did or not she did not refer to the incident.

"The colonel was a little too quick for you, wasn't he?" suddenly asked Vallert, who knew how the woman before him had tried to baffle the tenant of the dungeon of the dead.

Cactus Clara seemed to start.

"He caught the Mohave detective before I did. Do you mean that, Vallert?" she said.

"Yes."

"He could not wait for me," she answered, curtly, and with a show of resentment. "He has thrown one stone at two birds."

"How, Queen Clara?"

The Queen of the Desert darted suddenly at the nabob's spy, and her hand grasped his wrist.

"A man who has played spy for Colonel Centipede as long as you have knows the most of his moves before he makes them," parted her ashen lips. "I give you credit for a great deal of shrewdness, Vallert. You would be a genius if you were not the slave of the man who has never appreciated your services. Let me speak plainly. When did Colonel Centipede enter the lists against Blonde Burt for Meda's heart?"

The question was like a ball from a gun.

It struck the center of the target at which it was aimed, and Vallert, with a sharp cry, jerked his wrist loose from the woman's clutch and fell back, looking at her with eyes that appeared ready to fly from his head.

"I know nothing about that," said he, at

which Clara, who had eyed him sharply, broke into a derisive laugh.

"You have eyes, but you see not! Is that it, Vallert?" she exclaimed. "You mean that you don't want to betray the by-plays of the man you serve. I understand you. I've seen you before. Yes, Vallert, you were a shrewd fox before you wove your own and your master's web in San Satano. Here, you must tell me what I want to know."

"I betray nobody," snapped the spy, fiercely, and then he kept his lips together in a manner that seemed to defy the woman's resources.

"When did you first make that resolve?" queried Cactus Clara.

Vallert did not speak.

"Young man, your whole life has been betrayal," she went on. "You have thrived on the meanest, basest kind of treachery. There is a blot on your record which a sea could not wash out. Don't talk to me about loyalty. Go out and tell that falsehood to the winds, and they'll give you the lie, blowing it back into your face. You won't betray Colonel Centipede, you say?"

The face in the lamplight grew ghastly before the woman's stinging sentences. Its owner fairly squirmed.

"Now, will you come back to the present and answer me?" resumed the Desert Queen. "I ask you when Colonel Centipede first made love to his desert *protegee*?"

The question was hardly out of the woman's mouth than Vallert sprung up like a jack from its box.

"You can't escape the question," said Cactus Clara, looking up at him, without a muscle of her out of play. "You are going to meet it, whether you would or not, or somebody will pay for a dastardly deed performed long ago, but not forgotten. Yes, Vallert," she left the chair and faced him with her figure drawn to its true height and her black eyes on fire. "You can take your choice. You can answer me or go back over the desert, back through the trails of the mountains to the scene of your crime. And I may send you thither marked in a manner of which you may have heard."

His rapid look down at the hand that hung at her side told that her last words were thoroughly understood.

The deadly whip of the Desert Queen was there, its handle glittering in the light and the sharp lash almost touching the hem of her garment.

For a moment he seemed about to dash across the narrow space at her, then he appeared on the eve of a spring toward the door, but he did not desert his tracks.

"Which will you do, Vallert—tell the truth or take the consequences?" inquired Cactus Clara, when she spoke again.

"You force me to answer your question," was the reply.

"Then go on. Colonel Centipede is playing against the field for Meda the Unknown?"

"He is. I thought you had discovered this."

"I have not been here much—only off and on. It has not escaped your eye, Vallert?"

"No."

"How far has he progressed? I mean who has the best chances as the play stands now?"

"Colonel Centipede."

"Does the girl love him?"

"I don't know."

"What if the boy—Louis of Wayback—had a fair chance?"

Vallert grinned.

"Oh," he cried, "there would be no question as to the outcome then."

"The young man would be the girl's choice if Colonel Centipede and Blonde Burt did not interfere?"

"I think so."

"But they have Louis in a bad box."

"Yes—a death-trap," answered Vallert.

"It is Colonel Centipede's way of killing two birds with one stone," smiled Cactus Clara. "He may see one of the birds take wing. I allow no by-plays to interfere with my designs. I hate every drop of blood in Louis's veins! I could hold the girl before your eyes, Vallert, and cut her pretty face into strips. Tell Colonel Centipede a word about my visit, and back you go to a noose which has been formed for a neck just like yours! A still tongue and a safe head! Good-night!" and the nabob spy was alone again.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SPY'S STORY.

DAY was again breaking on desert and peak when the figure of Vallert, the nabob's spy, slipped into his master's presence.

All traces of his interview with the Queen of the Desert had disappeared, although he was not likely to dismiss it from his mind in a hurry, but Colonel Centipede suspected nothing of the sort.

"When will the play begin?" queried the colonel, when he had greeted his watch-dog.

"Nine is the hour set, you know, though something will be done before that time."

"Certainly; the court must be organized and everything prepared. The Indian is safe yet, eh, Vallert?"

"As safe as the dungeon with the iron door can make him."

Colonel Centipede smiled.

"That's safe enough," said he. "Has Silk Hand's absence been missed by his friends?"

"His friends, colonel?"

"Louis and Golden."

"They know nothing of the red-skin's capture."

"What of Meda?"

"The girl is not yet astir."

The satisfaction produced by Vallert's replies was visible on Colonel Centipede's face.

"You know that Cactus Clara is back?" he said, with a suddenness that made the spy start.

"I have seen the woman from the desert," was the response.

"She always comes when there is something going on here," continued Centipede, a frown settling over his brow.

"I thought you had sent Jason after her?"

"What! did you know that?" exclaimed the Arizona nabob. "Well, it is hard to keep anything from you, Vallert, ha, ha! Yes, I sent the boy out on such a mission, but Queen Clara came without him."

Vallert looked at his master, but said nothing.

"She tells me that a spy in her employ—an Indian—came this way a few days since," Centipede went on.

"On a trail?"

"Yes."

"On whose?"

"Juarez's."

"She still keeps a whip for the yellow lottery sharp, does she?" laughed Vallert.

Colonel Centipede nodded.

"Have you seen a strange Indian about, Vallert?"

"I have not."

"By George! that relieves me."

"Why should it?"

"I thought—I could not help it, Vallert—and you will pardon me, I know—that a mistake may have been made. These Indians often look very much alike especially after night—"

Vallert colored and said with a show of indignation:

"What! do you think I would commit a blunder in such an important matter?"

"No, Vallert; but Cactus Clara by her story of her Indian spy—"

"Put the suspicion in your head, anyhow, eh, colonel?" finished the spy. "No, no mistake has been made. The right man is in the right place. The dungeon in the mine holds the man whom you sentenced to it."

"I know that as well as if I had seen him cross the threshold," rejoined Colonel Centipede, in tones which were in part an apology. "When the iron portal is unlocked if it ever is, I am sure, Vallert, that the contents of the cell will testify to your thoroughness."

"I am willing to wait."

Colonel Centipede turned to a desk set partly in the wall and unlocking it took therefrom two maps which, though rolled together did not appear to bear any relation to one another.

Coming back to the table, he unrolled the maps and spread one before his spy. In a moment Vallert's eyes filled with a look of recognition which Centipede caught the instant he looked up at him.

"Ha! you know the country?" exclaimed Colonel Centipede, placing his finger on the map.

"It is the heart of Shasta-land," answered Vallert.

"When were you there?"

"A few years ago."

"Before you entered my service?"

"Before that."

"Which part of the region did you visit?"

Vallert bent over the map, and after a brief study of it, placed his finger on a certain spot.

"Were you prospecting, Vallert?" queried the man from San Satano.

"Not just that, though I kept my eyes open for nuggets."

"Well, what did you find?"

"A few old trails, some relics of abandoned gold-camps, and kindred things."

Colonel Centipede studied for a moment the face before him, and several moments passed before his gaze returned to the map.

"Along here somewhere," said he, moving his finger over the surface of the paper, "is a little valley called Freeze Out Basin. Did you ever visit it, Vallert?"

"I was there," was the prompt reply.

"And, pray, what did you find there?"

"The scene in the Basin was a repetition of several found in other parts of the country. There were the ruins of a camp. Half-burnt logs lying around as if the whole camp had been fired at one time, told the usual story."

"There was no sign of life there?"

"No; but I saw something I shall never forget."

Colonel Centipede seemed to lose a bit of color. He twisted uneasily in his chair, and waited for Vallert to continue.

"I happened to reach the ruins of the Mountain Camp at night, tired out and hungry," said the spy. "My first act was to get my supper, and then I fixed the horse for the night, for

I soon made up my mind to remain there. It was lonely and somewhat ghostly among the old logs with heaven knows what wild memories clinging to them. If you have ever been to Freeze Out Basin, colonel, you know that a large mountain comes down to its rim on the west, with a cleft in the heart of the huge pile, like that sometimes made by an earthquake."

"Well, I at first thought of camping in the cleft itself, but fixed myself better among the logs, and there I prepared for bed. But somehow or other, I could not sleep. The horse would wander away some distance and come back all in a quaver, and stand close to me as if in abject fear. About midnight I was startled from a doze by something pulling at my sleeve, and there was the horse tugging away as if he wanted to get me up as quickly as possible."

"I then recalled several camp-fire stories of haunted camps in the Shasta region, and in a second I sat bolt upright, much to Black Jo's satisfaction. For several minutes I saw nothing, then, in the weird light of the moon, which seemed inclined to creep into the cleft I have mentioned, there emerged from the mountain a man with a long white beard. I fixed my eyes on the apparition with my heart almost at a standstill, and a chill in my blood, for I knew that what I saw was not and could not be real. The figure came toward me alone, but in another moment I saw another object creeping behind it. It was a man with the stealthy, gliding step of the assassin. I saw the right arm thrown back in such a manner as to reveal the long knife-blade that glanced on his sleeve."

"I am sure that my poor horse saw this same ghostly play, for he stood beside me, rigid in every limb, with his eyes distended with horror, and fixed, as I thought, on the same sight which nearly froze my blood. The old man reached a spot apparently but a few yards from me. The other one had decreased the distance between them, and the hand that held the knife was no longer held half behind him. All at once the murderer sprung at the old man, and the two writhed and struggled in the dim moonlight like two well-matched foemen. The victim seemed unusually strong in spite of his aged figure. He promised to free himself from the assassin, and thus escape with his life, but all at once he fell back in the slayer's grip, and the knife struck two blows in swift succession. The moment the two men separated—the old man falling back, and the murderer remaining erect in his tracks—my horse gave out a singular sound. In another instant the whole scene had vanished, the moonlight showed me no midnight murder, and the cleft in the mountain was no longer an open door for apparitions. Yes, colonel, I have seen Freeze Out Basin, and there's not money enough to tempt me to put in another night among its scenes."

"The next morning I looked carefully over the playground of the two specters, but, as a matter of course, there was not the sign of a footprint there. Then I saddled Black Jo and left the Basin behind me, glad to get away from the haunted valley of Shasta Land."

When Vallert the spy finished his strange story, there was barely a vestige of color in Colonel Centipede's face.

At first he laughed, then he looked at the map on the table, and dropped his finger upon a certain mark in the mountains marked down there.

"You saw this strange midnight drama enacted in Freeze Out Basin, eh?" said he, glancing up at his spy.

"As I live, I did!" was the reply.

"Did you tell it afterward?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In the first camp I struck."

"Well?"

"It was an old story there; but they added a narrative to it."

Colonel Centipede said nothing.

"It seems," resumed Vallert, "that some years before an old hermit named Bodney—Baptist Bodney was his nickname—dwelt in that mountain. One night he was found—"

"Wait!" interrupted Colonel Centipede, springing up. "I thought something fell against the door."

In another moment Vallert was the only tenant of the room. He heard Colonel Centipede in the cramped hall, and then he heard a door open.

The next minute the nabob of San Satano came back into the chamber dragging a man by the collar.

Vallert bounded from his chair with a sharp exclamation, for he saw that the face at Centipede's clutch was horribly cut and bloody.

"It is Juarez, don't you see?" cried Colonel Centipede, dropping his burden at the edge of the table. "Look! there are three deep gashes across his face and all to the bone, too! He was a fool to come back while she was here. She told him she would do it, and it is done!"

Vallert washed the face on the floor, and saw with undisguised horror the three deep, gaping gashes that extended from one ear to the other.

"He'll kill her if he gets over this," he cried, gazing up into Colonel Centipede's face.

"Then, by my life! Juarez shall recover!"

was the nabob's answer as he dashed some brandy into a glass and poured it between the unconscious man's lips.

CHAPTER XXV.

CACTUS CLARA AND THE YELLOW CAT.

THERE is no telling how long Colonel Centipede would have continued the interview in which Vallert had just narrated the story of Freeze Out Basin if the startling arrival of Juarez had not taken place.

The little lottery sharp was constantly coming back to San Satano like counterfeit money.

This time, however, he had returned for a purpose which was quite clear in his head. As yet it was a secret of his own and he had nursed it and chuckled over it during his journey back until, when he found himself once more in the Arizona town, he would not have exchanged places with Colonel Centipede.

Juarez in pursuit of his design reached the Plaza just as the first arrows of sunlight touched and gilded the majestic peaks that lifted their heads above the valley. He knew nothing of Queen Clara's return to San Satano.

If he thought of her at all it was to congratulate himself that she was somewhere on the Indian's track, or leading her band of desert outlaws in search of new plunder.

At any rate she was not near enough to carry out her oft-repeated threat on his person, and before she could reach the camp he would be far beyond her merciless lash.

Juarez crossed the Square to the inviting door of the Double Daggers Hotel.

If he had glanced up at one of the windows that rose above the sloping roof of the porch, he might have caught sight of a pair of very black and very keen eyes which had already singled him out.

He had been seen by his old enemy!

Juarez crossed the hotel step and walked straight to the bar for his favorite "eye-opener."

As the presumed sole proprietor of the late grand swindle—the San Satano Wheel of Fortune—he had treated hundreds of deluded patrons at that very bar, but now he was promised the pleasure of drinking alone.

The man on duty behind the counter gave Juarez a look of amazement when he walked in.

He had not seen the lottery-sharp since the last drawing which had been succeeded by the total destruction of the policy shop.

It had been regarded as a little risky for Juarez to come back, for some very wicked threats had been made against him, but here he was with his one eye sparkling like a solitary diamond under the broad rim of his Mexican hat.

"Don't look me through, Cute Costello," he said to the barkeeper with a grin and a quick impatient toss of his head. "I'm the same Juarez and I'm here for my favorite decoration which please push forward without further invitation."

At that very moment, though Juarez heard it not, a footstep came down a flight of steps within five feet from where he stood.

It stopped on the bottom step and a hand was laid on the latch.

"You're back in time for the hanging," remarked the mixer of drinks as Juarez's yellow hand manipulated a pewter spoon in his glass.

"What hanging?"

"What! don't you know? They say he's your capital prize Injun—the Tall Mesquite!"

"No!" broke in Juarez so thoroughly astonished that he seemed to forget his thirst. "Has that rascal come back after his money?"

"Don't know. They've got him fast for killing Grimshaw."

"Growning Grimshaw?"

"Yes."

At this moment Juarez happened to think of his glass.

"I'd like to know how he came by the ticket he had," said he when he had returned the glass to the counter having swallowed its contents with a single gulp. "Mebbe I'll get a chance to ask him."

Just then the door behind Juarez opened without squeak or noise of any kind.

At the opening appeared the beautiful face of the Queen of the Desert. Her eyes had a flash which meant mischief of the coolest kind.

In the hand that hung at her right side and which was partly concealed in the folds of her gown was clutched the most dreaded lash on the border. The end of the cord touched the hem of her dress.

For half a second she watched Juarez with the delight of the tigress who gloats over the victim she can bring down at any time.

She was totally unseen, though Juarez would have relinquished the scheme which had brought him back to San Satano to have had a glance over his shoulder at that moment.

All at once she took a silken step toward her prey. The hand that held the whip drew back.

"I have you now, yellow cat!"

These words penetrated to the very heart of Juarez, the One-Eyed.

He whirled the moment they were uttered, and then with a wild cry of mingled terror and

discovery he reeled along the counter, his yellow hue changed to a ghastly white by the presence of the woman with the whip.

Cactus Clara went after him with a quick leap.

"I saved you from the noose, and kept your bones from the vultures," she cried, halting before the quivering man, who had drawn a long-bladed dagger, which he did not attempt to use.

"I made it possible for you to cheat your fellow-man and fill your lottery coffers. What was my reward? I had the fever at Dos Lopedo. I looked to you for assistance. In my delirium you left me to die. That was not all. You robbed me before you ran away!"

The whip went up. It seemed to be held for a breathless instant in mid-air above the woman's head, then it came down clean across the little man's face, cutting it to the bone and drawing from him a yell of agony!

Twice more in bewildering succession the merciless lash, wielded by the white-faced Nemesis, was laid across Juarez's cheeks, and then in his blind fury he rushed at his persecutor, but missed her, and landed on the porch beyond the open door.

"I presume he knows that I keep my word!" exclaimed Cactus Clara, waiting, whip in hand, for the One-Eyed's return.

Juarez did not come back.

Smarting under the fearful lashing he had received, and vowing vengeance at every step, he staggered across the Plaza, turned to the left, and ran on, to fall unconscious against Colonel Centipede's door, which he did not have the strength to open.

Thus it was that Juarez the One-Eyed came to the nabob's house in time to interrupt an interesting conversation.

But why should he fly to Colonel Centipede for help?

They had been partners in the gigantic fleecing scheme which had beggared more than one unfortunate, but beyond this there seemed no particular reason for Juarez carrying his bloody face to the bonanza king of Southern Arizona.

Some minutes elapsed after the yellow sport's arrival at Centipede's house before he opened his eyes.

During this time his face had been carefully washed and astringent plasters had been applied until the solitary eye looked out over the mass in a very ludicrous manner.

Colonel Centipede seemed very desirous that Juarez should recover from his injuries.

He knew who had inflicted them.

The autograph of the Queen of the Desert was three times written across the yellow sport's face, and when Juarez awoke from his swoon he did not have to speak the name of his tormentor.

"Where was your knife all the time?" queried Centipede.

Juarez felt in his belt but his hands found nothing but an empty sheath.

"You boasted that you would give her the length of the blade before the whip could touch you," continued the nabob.

The One-Eyed looked confused.

"Wait! there is time enough yet!" growled he.

"Not if she gets another chance at you."

Juarez looked at the colonel for a moment and then seemed to think that the Queen of the Desert might follow him.

"Will you let her in if she comes?" he asked.

"If I do you shall have fair play," was the reply.

"I want that," said Juarez. "I didn't get it at the hotel."

"What brought you back?"

The lottery sharp dropped his eye.

The question struck Juarez under his armor.

"I don't know what brought me back," he stammered, though Vallert who had been watching him all the time knew that the cunning scoundrel was lying. "Colonel, won't you keep her off. The whip went to the bone. I felt it there every time. The three blows came so fast you couldn't count them. I might have thought them a thousand for that matter. What a pantheress that woman is, and yet you seem to think a good deal of her!"

"I, Juarez?" cried Colonel Centipede, coloring to the temples as he went toward the yellow atom in the chair.

"She thinks so at any rate," grinned Juarez, in spite of his bandages.

"Did she ever tell you so?"

"No, but my one eye is not in my head for nothing. She thinks she has you in her net."

"She will find out that the fish is not there!" laughed the nabob, with a glance at Vallert.

"What else does she think, Juarez?"

The One-Eyed shook his head, and stole a glance at Vallert, the spy, whose presence in the room just at that time seemed to interfere with his desires.

Colonel Centipede detected the glance, and in another moment the spy was gone.

"Juarez," said Centipede, in confidential tones, "is it true that Cactus Clara thinks she has netted me?"

The single eye seemed to sparkle.

"She thinks nothing else," its owner answered.

Before Colonel Centipede could respond the door behind him opened, with the slightest noise.

"There! there! the tigress with the lash!" cried Juarez, starting from the chair. "You promised me fair play if she followed me up. Ah! give me half a show—stand aside! Let me have one leap at the she vulture's throat, and I'll vouch for the rest!"

To all this the woman standing near the door replied with a cool, derisive and fearless smile.

"You've patched him up, I see," she said, speaking to Colonel Centipede, who was regarding her with looks of suppressed rage and blank astonishment. "Is this the way you return the favors of the woman to whom you owe so much?"

"Do you mean yourself?" broke out the nabob.

"Colonel Centipede knows whom I mean," she exclaimed. "Let his thoughts go back a few years, and then let him say, if he dare, that he does not owe his very life to Cactus Clara, of the Desert. Yon cringing, whimpering, treacherous cat in yellow also owes his existence to the same person. The same hand saved both of you from the noose! A denial now is a lie in brass!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE EDGE OF THE CLOUD.

SCARCELY had the maddened woman's last word rung out than Juarez let loose again.

"Look! the whip is in her hand, colonel!" he cried. "I know what it is and by heaven Juarez lives from this moment solely for the purpose of paying her for her autograph in his face."

"You hear the dog's whine," laughed Cactus Clara, turning from the One-Eyed sport to the Arizona nabob. "I trust he will follow at my heels for vengeance. If he wants to devote the remainder of his life to vengeance I shall give him ample opportunity. You do not wish to reply to my last words. You know, Colonel Centipede, that but for the interposition of my hand you would not be the San Satano Croesus that you are. And I repeat that if I had not stepped between you, One-Eyed son of evil would not sit where he does. If you make it war, war it shall be! The prison doors of Mexico and California may be unlocked by some hand not red. The Indian trailer is out of the way. He will never finish the chain whose links he has picked up in different climes; but another will!"

If Colonel Centipede intended to answer this he was not permitted to do so, for Cactus Clara, with a last look full of victory at the patched-up face in the chair, took her departure.

"She said that the Indian was out of the road," ejaculated Juarez. "What did she mean, colonel?"

The nabob did not deem it best to impart to his former partner in the lottery scheme the new secret of the dungeon of the dead.

"She sometimes talks in puzzles, Juarez," was his reply. "The Indian may yet call upon you for the money belonging to ticket Number 2727."

"Not after the trial on the Plaza!" exclaimed the little man. "You forget that Red Arrow is to be tried for the killing of Grimshaw by a jury of the dead man's friends."

"If he appears, Juarez."

There seemed to be a double meaning in the colonel's words.

"If he has absconded the boy Louis stands in his stead."

"He does."

"Grimshaw's gang are not in a pleasant humor. They will nocse the hostage if the Indian is gone."

"Yes."

"Cute Costello was telling me about the affair when Cactus Clara slipped up like a tiger-cat. He said that Meda thinks the Indian innocent."

"She is said to do so."

"Have you seen her?"

"No."

Colonel Centipede shrugged his shoulders.

"It may be that the girl is trying to shield a guilty friend. There is a bond of some kind between them."

"Between Meda and Red Arrow?"

Juarez nodded, and his single eye sparkled again.

"What do you know, captain?" queried Centipede.

"I know something, if Red Arrow is the Tall Mesquite."

"He is the same."

"Then," said Juarez, bending forward, "I know that he visited Meda before he left town that night."

"Went to her house, did he?"

"To her house."

Centipede reflected a moment.

"I must not let this fellow see my eagerness over anything that pertains to Meda," he murmured. "He is as cunning and full of schemes as the best fox in his family. I know him of old, and I think I know how to match him."

"Juarez," he rejoined, "do you think Meda would deliberately state a falsehood to shield an Indian?"

At that moment the gaze of the two men met.

"I've never known the girl to lie to shield any one," answered Juarez. "If she says that Red Arrow did not kill Grimshaw—says it positively, colonel—I should be obliged to believe her."

A flush crimsoned the nabob's face, mounting quickly to his temples.

"If she said it out of trial, she may repeat it to the jury. That is not all."

"What else?"

"She may go on and name the guilty party."

Colonel Centipede slowly shook his head.

"Meda won't do this," said he. "She has said nothing since her first statement. The Grimshaw men will not put her on the stand if the red-skin appears for trial. The Indian or his hostage is to die for the killing of the growler of Blonde Burt's mine. Blood for blood! The stories of a score of Medas would not save the life that is to be thrown upon the balances to-day."

"Mebbe not. Then, if Meda does not come forward, Cactus Clara may."

"In whose interests?" cried Colonel Centipede. "Not in the Indian's, Juarez. She has been following him for years."

"Did you see her last look ere she went away?"

"I did."

"Well?"

"Her blood is hot. You riled it at the start, and it did not cool in temperature to find you protected where you are."

"She talked about the past, colonel," said the yellow sport, determined to shoot his little shafts beneath the nabob's armor wherever a chance offered itself. "She dared us to say that we do not owe our lives to her! To this she vulture of the deserts, colonel!"

A smile appeared instantly at the gold grandee's lips.

"She hit you pretty hard, eh, Juarez?" he laughed.

In a jiffy the one eye in the yellow head appeared to ignite.

"Hit me, did she?" chuckled Juarez. "I wonder if the man from California did not feel the same shaft? It was a double one, I thought."

"Of course it may have been intended for both of us, but coming so soon after the little affair at the hotel I thought you would take it as vinegar poured into your wounds."

Juarez showed his teeth in a malicious grin.

"Never mind, colonel. We two are in the same box, but you have the biggest side of it," said he. "I think I shall go down and see the fun on the Plaza."

"The play of the mob?"

"Yes."

"Cactus Clara may be there."

"With her whip, eh?" quickly queried Juarez.

"Of course."

"This time the she vulture of the desert won't get to set her talons in my flesh without some sport," was the responsive growl, and the yellow hand of Juarez threw back his braided and bloody jacket and displayed the butt of a dangerous-looking revolver.

Colonel Centipede looked pleased to see the deadly persuader of the border, for he knew that Juarez was quick in its use and that a better shot than he did not dwell in San Satano.

"If you use that you will have to fight for your life," said Centipede, still eying the six-shooter.

"I've fought for that before, colonel. And so have you."

This was going back to memories just at that time unpleasant, and the Arizona nabob replied with a silence which Juarez broke by saying that he was off for the trial on the Square.

"A living mass of jumbled meanness, bravery, and duplicity," murmured Centipede, watching the figure of Juarez from the window. "It wouldn't have been a bad thing for the world if he had smothered in a certain tunnel in Mexico. He didn't take very kindly to my suggestion that Cactus Clara hit him pretty hard. You are right, my yellow sport. It was a double blow. But the woman who has just left shall not beat me. In holding secrets I guess I can equal her. The record has been chiseled from the dungeon wall, but the dead is still there. Silk Hand, the Indian Ferret—the man who wants more than one person—will find the dead youth, but not the inscription. Interfere with my little by-play for the hand of Meda the Unknown, and I will show you that though you have earned the title of Queen of the Desert, I am king and autocrat of San Satano. Yes, I may owe my life to you, Cactus Clara; but by the eternal heavens above! that shall not prevent me from fighting you with fire. You have betrayed yourself. What I have suspected for months you have finally uncovered. You pretend to love the man who owes his life to you, and you will possess him or ruin him. That is the game. Touch the girl in your jealous rage!—attempt to beat the mob to-day for the baffling my plans and the desert will lose its queen and the carrion of the sand its vulture princess!"

Meantime Juarez the One-Eyed had reached the Plaza by an indirect route.

He found numerous groups of bronzed men scattered over it, but on and about the porch of

the Double Daggers Hotel the largest crowd seemed to have gathered.

The ex-lottery manager did not want to show himself too prominently with his patched-up face, which would recall his recent encounter with Cactus Clara. He knew not where the dangerous woman might be, and he had decided to keep out of her sight as long as possible.

His one encounter was enough for the present. The expected trial by and the vengeance of the Grimshaw faction monopolized everything else.

Colonel Centipede's miners, with those who had become their rivals by reason of being associated with Blonde Burt, were seen in every group.

The Grimshaw faction had "the floor."

They were not the loud-mouthed, hot-headed men of the night before. Several caucuses and an interchange of opinions had brought about a line of action which was as dangerous in its tendency as a wild rush at a prisoner. Coolness had taken the place of passion, but it was no less determined that Grimshaw should be avenged.

Juarez, in search of information, stole to the rear of the Double Daggers, and attracted Cute Costello's attention without betraying his presence.

It is doubtful whether his closest friends would have recognized him in his bloodshot eye and the patches.

"How goes the fight, Costello?" queried Juarez.

"They can't find the Injun," was the answer.

"The red has escaped—"

"And left the boy to stand the brunt?"

"I don't think so from last reports."

"What do they say?"

"The boy has sloped, too!"

The One-Eyed sport gave the barkeeper a look of wonder.

"Wait a moment," Cute Costello went on, turning back toward his bar. "The air is full of reports just now. Big Felix has just come in with another."

The door was purposely left open for Juarez's benefit, and while he leaned forward he heard a harsh voice say:

"The Injun an' the boy hev sloped, but we kin hang the big pard—Golden!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CLOUD ITSELF.

CUTE COSTELLO, the presiding genius of the Double Daggers's bar, did not have to impart this information to the little man with the solitary eye.

Juarez, who had heard every word, felt a strange thrill take possession of him for a moment.

The Grimshaw gang had been cheated out of a hanging, and the hand which had taken the life of its leader would not feel the vengeance of the mob.

The One-Eyed sport did not wait for Cute Costello to return, but drew back unnoticed and slunk off.

He had no interest in the proceedings of the men of the mine. They might hang Golden a dozen times over for all he cared. Indeed, he even thought that as they had lost the prisoner and his hostage, they had a perfect right to pull up the next best friend of either, or both.

He did not mingle with the groups on the Plaza.

"What do I care what they do?" muttered Juarez. "I've got some business of my own on hand, and self first, always."

If he had gone down a certain street—one with which he was familiar for the ruins of his policy trap were to be seen there—he would have seen several men in front of a certain door.

"Don't you know whar he is?" asked the foremost man whose foot was more than half-way inside.

His words were addressed to a young girl who quietly faced the three.

"I know nothing concerning his present whereabouts," answered Meda.

"He confessed his guilt by sloping, eh, girl?"

This was a direct thrust at the girl's assertion that Red Arrow or Silk Hand had not killed Grimshaw.

She colored at the touch.

"You know what I have said. I do not retreat," she replied with firmness.

The three men exchanged looks accompanied by smiles.

"The boy's sloped, too," the spokesman of the little party went on.

"The boy?"

"The young person who was record-keeper of the Heathen Chinese—Louis from Wayback. He went off with the Injun."

Meda made no reply but looked at the three men in silence.

"They're apt ter summon you before court," the leader resumed.

"I am ready."

"They will fall back on Golden now. He seems to be next o' kin, and Grimshaw's pards don't intend to bury him unavenged."

"They should proceed a little slow I think," said the girl.

"What's the odds?" was the instant retort.

"Ain't we strong enough to defend our rights, Meda?"

"There may be a hereafter. Golden is entirely innocent. He had no cause against your dead chief."

"Which insinuates that the Injun had, don't it?"

"Grimshaw was insulting."

"When?"

"After dismissal."

"He merely got off his motto—'No Injuns, no Chinese, no nonsense. It's San Satano's motto now.'"

Meda the Unknown saw that argument with the men before her was useless.

"You will have to defer to Captain Burt's opinion if he comes back in time," said she.

"Whar is Cap'n Burt?"

The question almost startled the girl by its suddenness.

"You must not expect an answer, for Captain Burt has not made me the keeper of his secrets," she rejoined with a smile.

The three Grimshaw pards turned away with looks of disgust on their dark faces.

"The girl knows more than she will tell," said one. "Put her on the stand, and she will stick to her assertion that the cap'n didn't die by the Injun's hand. But she won't go any further. She won't tell who did the deed."

"If we had the Mohave hyer, she might talk at the last moment."

"No," with a shake of the head. "Meda, of San Satano, is not attached to Red Arrow like all that."

Silence fell between the three for a moment.

"Boys, it'd hardly be fair ter hang the youth's big pard for the sake o' tryin' ter get even," suddenly said one.

The other two looked amazedly at their companion.

"We'll see what the court thinks," returned the man who had spoken most to Meda.

The court! Already in the Plaza, just ahead of the three, the court was about to open its session.

It was not the first time a tribunal of the same sort had held sway and passed judgment on that very spot. This time it was a very one-sided court in which the accused was condemned beforehand, and before whose bar the innocent might well tremble for their lives.

As the Double Daggers Hotel occupied the shady side of the Square, the crowd had taken possession of its porch and the ground immediately in front of it.

When the three men reached the spot, they discovered that the proposition to take Golden for the victim was not an idle one.

They saw Louis's stalwart friend, six feet above his stockings, broad-shouldered and cool, leaning against one of the pillars of the porch, with apparently but little interest in the scene before him. But the numerous eyes that watched the miner told that he was as much a prisoner as though he wore manacles, and was officially guarded.

All at once the figure of Big Felix was seen to emerge from the open door of the hotel.

He walked to the edge of the platform, and halting within five feet of Golden, looked round upon the crowd for a minute.

Big Felix held the double office of judge and high sheriff in San Satano.

On former occasions he had administered some very stern justice to some Southwest toughs, and although he belonged to the Grimshaw party he was acknowledged to be the best judge of law—wild law—in Arizona.

Loud talking ceased the moment Big Felix appeared at the edge of the porch.

"Gentlemen," he began, his voice as harsh as ever, "we have just learned that two parties expected to appear before this tribunal are not to be found."

"They've sloped!" cried several voices, and the giant judge raised his hand for silence.

"We were to try Red Arrow the Mohave, so called for the murder of Grimshaw," he went on. "Last night we were hot-headed and full of fire and the friends of the dead man had the Injun at the wall. But what men call 'better counsels' prevailed at the time and the prisoner was let off on human bail for his appearance before the tribunal this morning. Now," Big Felix stole a swift glance at Golden by the pillar, "now, gentlemen, both the prisoner and his bond have disappeared and we have to proceed as the court thinks best."

"There is a person near me who has borne the relation of companion to one of the escaping parties. He came to San Satano as that one's friend. Together they entered Captain Burt's employ and last night stood close together when the boy—the record-keeper—offered himself as surety for the prisoner."

"A man who stands where he does knows something!"

These words came from the crowd at the foot of the porch.

Everybody knew the speaker. He threw one foot forward as he uttered the words and then stepped clear of his comrades.

Colorado Clint was one of the malcontents of the camp. He could tell about Regulator courts in half a dozen Territories; he had roughed it

in every part of the wild West. In short, a man who carried his life on his sleeve and was never in his element unless he was engaged in the turmoil of a lynch court's session.

The brawny sport turned full upon Golden before he had finished.

"That's the man, gentlemen," he continued, singling out Louis's friend with his finger. "Let him open his mouth and tell what he knows about the slopers."

For half a minute Golden did not seem inclined to take any notice of Colorado Clint and his remarks.

He leaned against the pillar and looked at the crowd which was the tribunal of San Satano, organized during the silent watches of the night to shed human blood.

He saw that every eye was fixed upon him, and he must have known that a very small thing would precipitate something dangerous.

"Why don't he say something?" went through the crowd in audible tones. "He knows who the slopers are. Why don't he speak for or ag'in 'em? What's Golden's sand?"

Slowly the figure of the Wayback giant left the pillar until it stood entirely free.

Golden looked at Big Felix, the judge, and then, for the first time as it were, gave Colorado Clint some attention.

"Gentlemen, I am not the prisoner," said he, coolly, and with slow utterance. "I am not on trial nor regularly placed in the witness pen."

"Hol ho!" roared Colorado Clint, turning very red. "He's goin' to shirk everything an' defy yer court, judge! Thar war a time when San Satano would stand no nonsense o' this sort. No nonsense!—a part o' Grimshaw's motto. I'm for that motto now—the whole thing through from a to izzard!"

The applause that greeted this speech showed how the crowd stood.

It was one point scored by the loud-mouthed tough of the camp.

"I am here to answer any decent questions," said Golden, turning from the blusterer to the 'court.' "I shall keep back nothing that will block the wheels of justice. Go on."

He went back to his pillar and quietly folded his arms.

Colorado Clint seemed nonplused by the man's coolness, and the crowd could not but admire his manner of dealing with a very dangerous subject.

Big Felix saw that he had to come forward and the next moment he took a step toward Golden and called him by name:

"Did you see the Injun after the compromise last night?" he asked.

"I did," came the answer, promptly.

"And the record-keeper, Louis?"

"And Louis."

The crowd drew closer to the porch and consequently to the witness.

"Will you tell the court what you know about their disappearance?" proceeded the judge. Golden did not hesitate, as the crowd thought he would.

"The Indian is nearer than you think," said he. "Red Arrow did not go away on account of cowardice or guilt, for he is neither a coward nor guilty. Gentlemen, the blood of Grimshaw is not on the Mohave's hands. Meda of the Desert, as you call her, has told the truth, though not all of it. When the time comes she will speak out, but until then no man shall draw the secret from her keeping. As to the record-keeper—my friend Louis—he would have stayed and faced you but for me. I am the man who forced him away until your blood cools. He resisted to the last, for there is no coward blood in the young man's veins. After midnight I led his horse to the edge of the camp, and came back alone. Gentlemen, I am responsible for the boy's flight, but not for the Indian's absence. If you want Golden, o' Wayback, he stands before you. If you wait you may catch the guilty, but by the God above us now, Red Arrow is innocent. I know it!"

The hush that followed Golden's speech was complete.

Men looked at one another in speechless astonishment. Colorado Clint caught Big Felix's eye and held it for a moment.

Suddenly he wheeled toward Golden and exclaimed:

"If you know the Injun is innocent, you must know the guilty. Name him!"

Golden of Wayback shook his head.

"That's not for me to do," he replied.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

GETTING DESPERATE.

WITHIN hearing of these proceedings, though unseen by nearly the whole crowd, stood a woman with anxious countenance and glowing dark eyes.

Cactus Clara occupied a bit of floor near the doorway of the hotel, and not a word had escaped her eager ears.

She watched Golden closely while he spoke, hanging on each word as it dropped from his tongue.

"Does he know where Silk Hand is?" she mentally queried, when she had heard him through. "He confirms Meda's declaration that the Indian's hand did not finish Grimshaw, but he re-

fuses to accuse the guilty. I think I see through the tangle. What did you say about bringing down two birds with one stone, Colonel Centipede? Is it queer that I come back to you at this time? I think not."

As the Queen of the Desert thought, the court broke up after Golden's speech.

Colorado Clint did not like to see the intended victim slip through the fingers of mob vengeance in this manner, but Big Felix the judge did not think it best to go to extreme lengths with Louis's pard after his plain statement of what must have been facts.

Besides this, a quiet feeling had worked itself up in favor of the Indian's innocence. After all a mistake might have been made. There was no positive evidence against the red detective. His absence was the worst thing he had to fight.

True, the crumpled paper found in Grimshaw's hand—a paper whose authorship is known to the reader—warned the dead man to beware of the Mohave; but that was no proof against him.

Grimshaw hated Indians, he had spat out his venom in the red miner's hearing, and, hard upon his action, had been killed.

For some time after the bloodless adjournment of Big Felix's court, the men of San Satano discussed the new turn affairs had taken.

Golden had been permitted to walk off unfollowed, except by the eyes of the Grimshaw faction. The human tigers were loth to let the marked victim get away.

Vallert, as a matter of course, carried a full report of the affair to his master.

Colonel Centipede asked no question until the story had been told.

There was one feature in it which he did not like—the escape of Louis.

The Indian Vidocq was safe enough; the iron door in the mine had closed on him, and he (the colonel) kept the key.

"So Golden publicly declared that he helped the boy off?" questioned Centipede.

"He said so without reserve."

"He's an impudent fellow, Vallert."

The spy thought it had taken a good deal of courage for Golden to say this in the crowd that composed the court.

"I see that while that man is allowed to run loose the boy will not want for a friend to suggest and to assist," continued Colonel Centipede. "So he confirmed Meda's statement?"

"Yes."

Colonel Centipede bent his body forward, and seemed to study Vallert's face for a moment.

"What do you think about Grimshaw's death?" he asked of his spy.

"It's one of these misty crimes that one comes across now and then."

The nabob fell back.

"But who would kill Grimshaw?—who but Silk Hand, I mean?"

"Ah, that's the puzzle, colonel," laughed Vallert.

The handsome owner of the Arizona Queen took several nervous turns about the room.

"Where was Queen Clara while the court and Golden were having it at the hotel?" he questioned, stopping suddenly within three feet of his spy.

"She was just inside."

"Where she could hear it all?"

"Yes."

"I could have guessed that."

"And Juarez? Where was the marked-for-life yellow cat?"

"On the outside of the crowd, out of reach of Cactus Clara's whip."

"Of course! But he could hear the proceedings, eh, Vallert?"

"With ease."

"Go and find Juarez. Bring him here immediately," commanded Colonel Centipede. "Don't escort him hither in brass band style, but see that he comes all the same, and as soon as possible."

The spy withdrew.

It did not take him long to find the victim of the Desert Queen's outburst of rage.

After some search he discovered Juarez in a cabin contemplating his patched-up face by the aid of a piece of looking-glass and vowing all sorts of vengeance against the woman who had given him the lash.

Juarez threw the glass against the wall at Vallert's entrance and grinned a welcome in a way that increased his hideousness.

"Wants me, does he? The colonel wants me, eh?" exclaimed the One-Eyed. "Ha, ha, it's not the first time! I go at once, Captain Vallert. The way is clear, I presume. I won't have to stop and cancel my debt with the viperess of the sands? No! She will keep out of Juarez's way. Ah! she had better! The tables will be turned before long. Juarez will feel his hurts smarting some day, then let the queen of the cat look out!"

Vallert looked amusedly after the little figure with the one blazing eye, which went over the ground toward Colonel Centipede's house.

"Concentrated ferocity and cunning," thought the spy. "I wonder that Colonel Centipede ever had anything to do with him; but crime makes unpleasant bedfellows. You can't kick 'em out, either."

Juarez had quick feet when he wanted to

reach a place where he thought he could be of some advantage to himself, and in a short time he glided into the nabob's presence.

"I'm here, colonel; disfigured, but still in the arena," grinned the One-Eyed, dropping into a chair uninvited, and looking anxious for the master of the bonanza to proceed.

"So I see, Juarez," replied Centipede. "You don't think of tilting for Queen Clara's heart, do you?"

"Yes," growled the yellow sport. "Some day I do. I certainly do, colonel, no joking; honor bright! But not after the usual manner," he added, his face growing dark. "I shall make love after my own way. See if I don't."

Colonel Centipede seemed to understand all this, for he met it with a smile.

"I've sent for you on important business, Juarez," he then pursued. "Do you recollect the young captain of Mexican cavalry who was your pest while you were hiding in the chaparral?"

Juarez gave a quick start which was answer enough.

"Never mind. I see you have a good memory," smiled Centipede. "What was his name?"

"Captain Louis Morello."

"Ah! so it was. Well, he had a wife at the time."

"I don't know about that," said Juarez, shaking his head.

"They were not living together, but she was his wife all the same."

"I don't see the connection, colonel."

"Not with that one sharp eye of yours, Juarez? Did you ever see the charming wife of the man who would have dragged you back to the dungeon?"

"Never."

"Ha, ha! you've seen her often," laughed Centipede. "She has left her autograph on your face."

Juarez the One-Eyed bounded from his chair.

"Is the Queen of the Desert the wife of Morello the bloodhound?" he cried. "No, no! it cannot be, Colonel Centipede. Why, it was through her that I escaped."

"Behold the double cunning of the she vulture of the sandy plain," the nabob hastened to say. "Juarez, my worthy friend, she wanted you out of the toils for a reason. She may have known that that husband of hers, as bloodhound and prisoner-chaser, would be commanded to bring you in. It is true, as I have said, that the pair were not on very good terms at the time, but the ways of the women are past finding out."

"They are by my one good eye!" and the fist of Juarez came down upon the table with solid emphasis. "So she wanted me out to get a few whiffs of fresh air, and then to be dragged back to the rat-infested cell again? Ah! if I had known that when she was down with the fever at Dos Lopedo!"

"Time enough yet, Juarez."

"She helped you, too, colonel. The two prisons were far apart—one in California—"

"Yes, a long stretch of country separated us then," interrupted Colonel Centipede.

"Did she rescue you to have you hunted down?"

"There's no telling, the cunning of that woman is so wonderful."

Juarez looked at the nabob, but did not speak.

"They did not finish the Indian to-day," suddenly resumed the colonel.

"No, nor the young record-keeper," said Juarez. Both got away.

"What is to be the next move?"

"I don't know. The Grimshaws want blood. They will begin to look for some one besides Red Arrow."

"Does Meda's declaration gain friends?"

"It does."

"What do its friends say?"

"I don't circulate among them much. My face, you see. I haven't heard much, colonel, but still I catch the drift."

"Well?"

"It is believed that the slayer of Growling Grimshaw is in San Satano?"

"Do they say so, Juarez?"

"I hear such intimations."

For a moment Centipede withdrew his gaze from the yellow face before him.

"Peste! these detectives can't find out anything!" he exclaimed. "Where will they begin? Juarez, are you able to sit a saddle?"

The question, put so abruptly, threw the One-Eyed off his balance.

"What is to be the distance?" he asked.

"Not far. I want to send a trusty man to Wayback."

"That is across the desert."

"So it is."

"They might want me there."

"For assaulting Louis in the gambling-den? No; Major Lasso, who choked your guard, and received Louis's stock in the 'Jumping Jupiter' for his trouble, will treat you civilly. By the way, you did not recognize the major at the time?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Your old friend, Captain Morello!"

"The deuce!" ejaculated Juarez.

Colonel Centipede nodded.

"I want you to go to Major Lasso for me."

"When?"

"To-night."

"I will go."

The reply was accompanied by a good deal of singular eagerness.

"In order to create no suspicion by your coming back here for orders, Juarez," proceeded Colonel Centipede, "I will write the message now."

The bonanza nabob wrote rapidly for a moment and sealed the letter after, which he handed it to the One-Eyed Sport who immediately took his departure.

"What, in the name of the saints, is up now?" Juarez asked when he found himself back in the shanty.

Then he deftly opened the letter and read:

"MY DEAR MAJOR:—I send you a specimen of *her* work in plaster—your old friend Jose Paquina *alias* Juarez, the One-Eyed. He is as handsome as he used to be, but he is the same old raven. I can trip the lady herself and do both of us a service—myself especially—if you will come up alone or with the messenger to give eclat to the proceedings. I thought I never would turn on her, but I must or lose the game. We will open the iron door when you come and San Satano will do the rest."

"CENTIPEDE."

Juarez read these words with his one eye, a coal of fire in his head.

"I see!" he cried. "There's one woman too many in San Satano for the colonel," and then he held the letter at arm's length. "I wonder what Cactus Clara would give for it?" he laughed.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CLUTCH IN THE DARK.

NOBODY understood the situation better than the cunning little man with the solitary optic.

For several minutes he gazed at the letter he had opened, then he proceeded to restore it to its original condition as nearly as possible, as if he had decided not to attempt to sell it to the Queen of the Desert.

"I came back to San Satano to see how much I could get out of my old pard the colonel to keep dark about a certain matter," he said to himself. "Didn't I see him breaking chips from the wall of the dungeon in the Arizona Queen? What sort o' record was he cutting out? And when I had fixed the door so that he couldn't shut it didn't I creep in and find a dried-up human body on the ground—the prisoner of the cell and the person who made the record Colonel Centipede blotted out? That's what fetched me back to camp, but I ran across the woman's whip before I got a chance to hint at what I knew. The man in the cell was—ah! I have an idea! He crossed the threshold with the colonel's knowledge and Cactus Clara was in the secret, too. Let me see. What is this I found by the dead man?" and Juarez took from his bosom a silver piece smooth on one side and stamped with the letters "A. M."

"That confirms the suspicion," he went on, returning the pocket-piece to his bosom. "The border knows a part of the story of the missing person called Arthur Malabar. Cactus Clara was very attentive to him at Dos Lopedo and all noticed the striking resemblance between the two. All at once both disappeared and the boy—he was but a boy—never came back. I saw them after the day they left Dos Lopedo—saw them by moonlight in San Satano, but for a moment only. I wish I could have seen the writing on the wall which Colonel Centipede chiseled out. He put it there—Arthur Malabar, the youth who was liked wherever he was known. What did they have against him, and how was he in Cactus Clara's way. Ah! if the Indian—the red detective—knew about this strange tragedy!"

Juarez struck his fist on the table.

"Maybe the red-skin did know it!" he exclaimed. "Cactus Clara hunted him like a tigress, but he always eluded her. And there is Meda the Unknown! Who is she? Colonel Centipede brought her in from the desert one day—found her delirious in the sun lashed to a wagon with a dead man near by and dead horses there, too. What a set of tangled lives we have here to be sure, and the man who was to disentangle the skin—Silk Hand the Indian—what has become of him?"

Juarez the One-Eyed found no reply to his question.

During the remainder of the day he stuck close to the shanty, and none but Vallert the keen knew where he was.

A thousand times the solitary eye watched for a few moments the course of the sun and the lengthening of the shadows.

He had made up his mind to carry Centipede's message to Major Lasso, the nabob of Wayback City.

At sundown Vallert passing by the cabin leaned toward the door long enough to say:

"The colonel expects you to get off by eight," and Juarez replied quickly, "I will go."

The first shadows of night saw a little figure creep from the shanty. It ran to the stables in rear of the nabob's house and soon led out a horse.

"This will give me a start in the colonel's

eyes," grinned Juarez. "I am going to play a bit of private business for myself before I get off. It won't take long and there may be millions in it."

He led the animal through the camp to the mouth of Colonel Centipede's bonanza. Night had now fairly set in and the darkness suited the sport's purpose to a nicety.

He picketed the steed near the mine and went forward into the tunnel.

It was his first visit since the time when crouched near the iron door of the dungeon of the dead he heard and even saw Centipede chipping the dead prisoner's inscription from the stones.

"Of course," mused Juarez, "the door is as I left it—with the sly bit of iron for a disturbing wedge so that it cannot shut closely. I shall look at the dead once more—this time with a light; I had none before. Maybe I can make Cactus Clara pay me well for every blow she dealt at the Double Daggers."

He went down the underground corridors with his hand moving along the wall.

At length with an ejaculation of joy he touched the iron door.

"I'm no weakling if I ain't a giant!" exclaimed Juarez finding the heavy ring and getting a good grip on it. "I've opened doors as strong as this before, and without such a prize ahead, too."

The next moment he placed one foot against the stone near the lock and pulled back with all his strength.

He might have pulled at the rock itself for the door did not yield a trifle.

Dropping the ring he ran his hand along the top of the portal.

"My wedge is out. The door is locked!" he cried. "Colonel Centipede has come back. May Satan take him for his suspicions! Now I have a mind to take the letter straight to Cactus Clara instead of Major Lasso," which was the boast of a man decidedly out of humor, for the dreaded whip carried by the beauty of the desert was apt to deter Juarez from doing anything of the kind.

For some time the baffled man fumed and raved before the door.

Once or twice he thought he heard singular sounds beyond the iron as if the dungeon again held a prisoner, but they died out so soon that he could not determine where or what they were.

Match after match the One-Eyed sport expended in his attempts to thoroughly inspect the door and its situation, but these told him that he could not get in without the assistance of the key.

He threw his last match at his feet with an exclamation of rage and disgust.

"Well, I can go to Major Lasso!" cried he. "I can deliver the letter to the man who hunted me through the chaparral. The colonel says he doesn't want me now. He has left the army, and I am not in Mexico."

Captain Juarez was about to turn from the door in the stone, when from amid the Cimmerian gloom that encompassed him, a hand dropped upon his shoulder!

The little scoundrel fell back, a sharp cry of horror breaking over his lips, but he could not escape from the clutch.

He was held as by a vise, and trembling in the Unseen's grip, he felt a cold sweat creep over his forehead.

"In Heaven's name, who are you?" demanded Juarez. "You may be man, you may be devil. Bless me, if I am ready to decide between the two."

A loud laugh seemed to greet these words.

"You are Captain Juarez," said a voice.

"I am—Juarez Jaccato, though my last name is seldom attached to the first nowadays."

"Well, Juarez, I want to see you."

"Which you can't do here, eh?"

"That is true. Let us go elsewhere."

In another second the yellow sport went down the passage which led deeper into the mine, but not alone. His hand was held by the grip of the Unknown, and he could not but note how noiseless were the footsteps that kept pace with his own.

When the two came to a halt, they stood where the air was better, and Juarez, who knew the mine in all its windings, believed that they had reached one of its numerous chambers.

He was still held as before when a match flashed up, and his one eye saw the tall, well-rounded figure of his captor.

But he saw little more.

The face was entirely masked, and the hat showed him but unsatisfactory glimpses of dark hair.

"You are going away, Juarez," began the Unknown, fixing a pair of piercing eyes upon the face beneath them.

"Am I?" grinned the yellow sport.

"You have just said so. You are going to Major Lasso."

Juarez made no reply, but kept his lips closed and waited for his captor to proceed.

"Let me see the message, Captain Juarez."

The ex-lottery sharp of Arizona mechanically drew back.

What! let this person see Colonel Centipede's letter to the Southern nabob?

"Come," broke in the Unknown, impatiently.

"You have the letter, Juarez. Let me see it."

"That would be treachery," stammered the One-Eyed.

"Treachery? Is it possible, Captain Juarez, that you have forgotten that your whole life has been one of treachery and greater crimes? A pretty fellow you are, to talk of honesty in a matter of this kind! I'll make a monk of you yet. Here, my honest thief, produce the letter."

Juarez ground his teeth and surrendered.

As he extended the message, he stared at the hand that took it.

It was dark, the unmistakable hand of an Indian.

"My God!" cried Juarez, looking up into the two keen eyes again. "I know you now. Why didn't you stand trial? Was the Grimshaw gang too strong for you?"

"Soo strong for who?" queried the tall owner of the dark hand, who stood near the wall and under the mining lamp to which he had put his match.

"For you!—for Red Arrow!"

Juarez thought he saw the twinkling of two eyes behind the black mask.

"Are you sure of me, Captain Juarez?" laughed the hidden lips.

The single eye looked at the dark hands once more.

"Yes," said he. "You are said to be the Tall Mesquite from San Bardo—the person who presented No. 2727, and claimed my big prize. Then you came back, so they tell me, as Red Arrow, and got into hot water by the death of Grimshaw, whether you caused it or not. I put this and that together, you see. I never forget hands when I see them. You are the Indian who wouldn't stand trial before Judge Felix's court."

Again the same eyes seemed to twinkle.

"Never mind. Don't interrupt me now," answered the yellow sport's captor. "I'll look at the message. It has been opened before! Juarez, how honest you are!"

Two dark hands carefully opened the message which Captain Juarez had lately read in the shanty, and the eyes in the mask read it carefully.

Where is your horse?" asked the Unknown, looking suddenly at Juarez.

"On the outside."

"What brought you to the iron door before you started?"

"That is my secret," ventured the little man.

"Your secret, ha?" was the quick answer.

"This is a bad time for secrets, Juarez. You didn't want to get in, did you?"

"No, no!"

"But you pulled at the ring with all your might. Did you expect to let the bird out?"

"The bird?"

"Yes—the red bird, Jose Paquina."

"What do you call me?"

"Jose Paquina!" repeated the Unknown.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE TWO MOHAVES.

"DON'T you like the name?" asked the man with the mask, noticing the change of color which the singular cognomen had produced on the yellow sport's face.

"I don't wear it, anyhow," answered Juarez with a grin.

"No, you lost it in the chaparral. You are not the only person who has lost his name under similar circumstances. But let us have no more of this. You are going to Major Lasso, the nabob of Wayback. How long will it take to cross the desert, Juarez?"

"That depends on the horse. Jason took the best one when he went off."

"Where is Jason?"

"He never came back."

"But you will, won't you, Juarez?"

It was a strange question, the One-Eyed thought, and he said 'yes' to it.

"Then I won't keep you here any longer. Your message! Ah, I had almost forgotten it. Place it in Major Lasso's hands as you have been commanded to do. Do you know the major?"

Juarez shrugged his shoulders as he recalled what Colonel Centipede had told him concerning the nabob in the South.

"I see," said the Indian. "You have not forgotten the sleuth-hound of the Mexican bush."

Five minutes later, Captain Juarez came out of the mine alone.

"By the saints, that's curious!" thought he. "A masked Injun in the bonanza. I sized him up when I called him Red Arrow, for he didn't deny. Who is 'the bird' in the cell with the iron door? He did not mean the one who has been there for years—Arthur Malabar! No, no!"

He walked to his horse and took the saddle.

"I've got another secret and one which I could sell; but hang it all, I never get any further! Here I came back to say to Colonel Centipede: 'Give me ten thousand dollars to say nothing about the dead boy in the dungeon, and I'll go away forever;' but I haven't broached the sub-

ject. Then I could say to Cactus Clara: 'Hand over five thousand for an important message from Centipede to Major Lasso,' but I lack the 'sand' to do that. Now, I know where the cool, tracking Injun is—the one who eluded the Grimshaw gang. I could sell him out, too; but if I should fail to deliver the goods—and I might—Zounds! I wouldn't fall into his hands for the world. No. I'll keep my mouth shut and go to Major Lasso."

As to the person left in the mine by Juarez, he went back through the passages to the locked door of the secret dungeon.

If Juarez could have looked ahead when he approached the portal he would have discovered that he had disturbed the Unknown at the spot.

For some time the Indian—he had removed his mask for he was alone again—leaned against the door with his ear at the keyhole.

"I find that one of the walls have been chipped," said a voice on the inside. "My hands tell me this."

"Does it feel like something had been cut out?"

"It does. The floor at the foot of the wall is littered with pieces of stone."

The man on the outside was silent for a moment.

"You have no matches, you say?" said he at length.

"I have none."

"I am going to tie two together and attempt to pass them to you."

"Under the door?"

"No, through the keyhole."

"All right."

A few seconds afterward the inside voice was heard again.

"I have the matches."

"Good!" was the response. "Now use them to advantage. Examine the wall and then the body which you say lies on the floor dry as a mummy."

If the person in the passage could have looked into the cell he would have seen by the light of a match the half-naked figure of an Indian. He had a wild and half-starved look like the prisoner of a dungeon is supposed to have. His raven hair hung long and coarse, and if stood alongside the man on the outside he would have overtopped him by an inch.

The prisoner of the mine dungeon ran his match back and forth over the wall in front of him.

He seemed to follow Colonel Centipede's chisel in every stage of its work, and when he had completed this survey he bent over the body on the ground.

At last the second match expired and he cast the remnant from him.

"I have looked," cried he, with his lips at the keyhole.

"Well, what did you see?" came to him through the same aperture.

"Whatever was on the wall has been completely cut out," the captive answered. "There isn't the shape of a letter left."

"A clean job, eh?"

"A good job."

"Who is your fellow-prisoner?"

"He appears to be a youth, long dead, but strangely preserved. The face is dark, and the skin is drawn tight over it like leather."

"Look at his hands."

"I have examined them."

"Is a portion of the middle finger of the left hand missing?"

"It is missing."

"And the body is perfect otherwise?"

"Yes."

"Red Pablo," said the man, on the outside, "I am going to get you out."

"I knew the Mohave would not go back on the brother who was mistaken for him in the camp of the white men. The key is in the hands of Colonel Centipede. It was the last thing I heard ere the iron door closed: 'The key to the master; you know, Vallert,' said a voice."

"Remember the terms, Red Pablo. You are Cactus Clara's slenth-bound; you were to keep track of Juarez for your mistress, and, finally, to bring him to her lash. You will not have to do this now. The whip has found the single-eyed imp in yellow. He is now on the desert, serving Colonel Centipede. You must go from San Satano."

"Without vengeance, brother?—without turning on the men who shut me up in this hole and left me to die like a dog with the dead and the darkness?"

"Your time will come."

"Yes," the reply had a grating sound. "Red Pablo's time will come! They sprung at him like wolves in the dark, and the poncho which they threw over his head almost took his life. They were watching for you, brother."

"For me, Red Pablo. When the game is ended you will forget the choking and the imprisonment."

The figure that glided from the iron door a few minutes afterward was that of the Indian who had talked with the prisoner of the mine dungeon.

He found the main passage in the dark, and kept on until he reached the free air and the brilliant starlight.

Straight ahead shone the shanty lights of San Satano, and he eyed them for some moments with eagerness and curiosity.

All at once he started toward the lights, and seemed to disappear among them.

Was he Silk Hand? Had Juarez, the One-Eyed, identified him in spite of the mask—recognized him by his hands, and his well-shaped figure?

Colonel Centipede, in his little audience room, was asleep in his chair.

It was past midnight.

Vallert may have been dogging the actions of the Queen of the Desert, or watched Golden, the man who had destroyed the intended work of Big Felix's court.

The nabob of Arizona had nothing to do but to wait for his spy, and to tarry long at the velvet wine.

That he had successfully tarried was seen in the deep slumber which held him in bonds.

Out of such a sleep he had been shaken on more than one occasion, but this time he was not to be roused in this manner.

At a certain time the door behind him began to open by degrees.

It did not creak in the least, nor did the foot put forward in advance of the face above it make the slightest sound.

Colonel Centipede saw not the tall figure whose shadow fell across the floor as it passed around the table to reach him.

The hands of this person were dark, and the shaded face was that of an Indian, though the hair had been gathered together and plaited behind.

A smile played with the dark lips while their owner studied the nabob a few seconds.

Then the Indian opened the drawer in the table and put his silken hand inside. Evidently he did not find there what he wanted, for he looked at the colonel again, and then opened his vest.

Suddenly the eyes of the red-skin glittered, and the hand drew from Colonel Centipede's pocket an iron key, which vanished the moment it saw the light.

All unconscious of this spoliation the Croesus of San Satano slept on. The Indian went away as noiselessly as he had come and the door shut again.

Beyond the house a man bounded through the starlight and vanished from the stars in the mouth of Centipede's bonanza.

He kept on through the darkness until he bent toward the floor of the corridor and called:

"Red Pablo!"

"Here, brother," responded a half-smothered voice.

The next minute a sound like the recoil of a heavy bolt was heard and then the Indian on the outside caught the iron ring and pulled it back.

The door had barely opened ere a man came out and in the gloom the two Indians stood face to face the rescuer and the rescued.

"I must have a glimpse of what is there," said one. "Shut the door after me, Pablo."

This was done and in a little while two sharp eyes were following the movements of a fragile match.

"That will do. I've seen enough. It is another link for the chain," spoke a voice as the door opened. "Pablo, my brother—"

"Hist!" interrupted the gaunt red who had lately stepped from the living grave. "Look yonder. A light moves like a firefly. The man behind it, brother—"

"Is the spy of the golden sport?"

The two Indians drew back to the wall and drew their bodies up on the natural shelf that invited them.

Down the mine corridor a light was moving in a manner which told that it was approaching. In a short time the steps of some one were heard.

"He comes to look after me, brother," whispered one of the reds, and through his clinched teeth he added:

"I am here and Vallert shall find me!"

Straight to the iron door came the man and his light. Four eyes saw him listen at the keyhole a moment, then two figures dropped from the shelf.

The person caught tried to tear himself from the iron grip of the red hands, but it was useless. The door opened and shut, and the doomed man on the inside was Colonel Centipede's spy—Vallert!

CHAPTER XXXI.

WILL THE MAJOR COME?

COLONEL CENTIPEDE on emerging from his deep slumber found that a new day had begun. He wondered why no one had come, why Vallert, always watchful and suspicious, had made no report.

He did not dream that the iron door of the dungeon of the dead had closed on his faithful servitor.

Why should a thought of this kind enter his brain?

The heavy key was where he had put it before tampering with the soft, delusive wine; Vallert would come by and by and then he would hear how affairs were moving in San Sa-

tano, what events, if any, had succeeded the brief session of Judge Felix's court, and whether Meda's assertion was gaining ground.

The sun came up, bringing no Vallert.

His mine boss dropped in to ask if the men were to have another holiday.

He said he had not seen the spy.

"A trail out of camp, probably," mused Colonel Centipede, when he had dismissed the robust overseer who said that matters had quieted down, though it was expected that an exciting demonstration would take place on the occasion of Grimshaw's funeral that afternoon. "Vallert belongs to me, knowing no self in anything he does. I will have to wait for him a little longer. His report will compensate me."

Juarez, if nothing had happened, was well on toward Wayback City with the message, twice opened already, for Major Lasso.

It was a second thought of Colonel Centipede's to summon to San Satano the once husband of Cactus Clara.

He saw that the Queen of the Desert who all the time had been playing for his heart, and of course for his wealth, was resolved on victory or ruin.

She had discovered his own schemes against the fair young girl found on the desert—Meda the Unknown—and all her cunning, all her subtle energies would be put forth to baffle him.

He would not go back and think of the services Queen Clara had rendered him. She had told him to his face that he owed his very existence to her, and as we have seen he had not denied it.

The adventuress had had a strange, exciting life, so had he.

Their paths had crossed more than once, and if the Arizona nabob had confessed to the truth he must have acknowledged his indebtedness to the princess of the whip.

His plan was now to get rid of the shadow from the desert.

He wanted Major Lasso in San Satano to prove a certain event which, once sustained, no matter how Cactus Clara might retaliate, would bring her schemes to naught.

But would he come?

Colonel Centipede knew how the Croesus of Wayback hated the woman once his wife. He had left the Mexican Army had changed his identity, as much as possible certainly his name, and for years had had no communication with her.

Still her presence in the country annoyed him. She had played several big hands in Wayback City, as if for the purpose of irritating him, but he had not shown by any outward sign that he was annoyed.

"He will come!" cried Colonel Centipede, when he thought of Major Lasso. "The blow will crush this female Beduoin of the desert and we—the major and I—need fear her no longer. I wish the Indian had turned on her. She dogged him long enough to give him many a chance; but he will turn on no one now. Under lock and key! Buried with the dead. Silk Hand, it was a long trail for nothing—a brilliant chain with the last links wanting, ha, ha!"

Colonel Centipede was still alone waiting for the return of the man to whose terrible prison he held the key when a gentle, timid knock sounded on his door.

He sprung into the hall and opened the portal.

Meda!

The Arizonian Croesus drew back at sight of his *protegee* on his step.

Returning his good-morning with a faint smile, Meda of the Desert walked into the audience-room and stood by a chair.

"Sit down," said Colonel Centipede, his eyes showing how welcome though unexpected the girl was. "You don't come to see me often, Meda. It is the other way generally."

Meda took the chair, and encountered the nabob's look.

"Colonel Centipede," she began, "you told me once that I should not always live in San Satano."

"When was that, Meda?"

"It was shortly after I came."

"Oho!" laughed the colonel. "That was long ago."

"Yes, five years at least. I have not forgotten, you see."

He gave her face a deep, searching look.

"Do you want to go away?" he asked.

"I do. I want better associations. These rough men are getting to quarrel like wolves. There is going to be a war between the mines. Blonde Burt's men and yours are showing their teeth on the Plaza and at the hotel now. The arrival of Captain Burt will not put out the flame."

"What! has Blonde Burt returned?" exclaimed Centipede.

"He is back again."

It was evident that this intelligence did not delight the nabob.

"Where has he been?" he quickly queried.

Meda shook her head.

"The strife will not reach you, girl," said Centipede. "You can not be drawn into these jealous quarrels of a lot of men whose occupation and habits transform them into snarlers. I

am master in San Satano. The man who brought you in from the desert and to whom you owe your life is able to keep you out of the muddle. You must not think of going away."

Meda dropped her eyes.

"Whither would you go?" asked Colonel Centipede watching her closely.

"Ah! the world is large," exclaimed Meda brightening. "I will find friends."

"Who put this notion into your head?" the colonel frowned as he spoke. "Who has been coaching you, girl?"

In an instant the child of the desert reddened to the temples.

"Come!" cried Centipede, leaning forward and touching her arm. "You have been talked to; they don't want you here. It is a part of the scheme—the plot against me!"

"The plot against you?" echoed Meda.

"Yes, the plot of the viperess who has thrown her shadow across my path because—well, never mind why just now, Meda! She wants you away! She has seen you lately; since the trial which hanged nobody. Come! you must confess it, girl."

"If you mean Cactus Clara—"

"I mean the beautiful she vulture of the sand!" was the interruption. "When did you see her last?"

"She came to my house this morning."

"Ha! at work, I see!" growled Centipede.

"For twenty years the brain of that woman has been hatching plots, and her fingers have spun webs of all kinds. Now a faro queen in California, anon a pistol princess in Mexico, and again the organizer of a band of desert brigands, she has had a life of it. Never idle, never content to keep her hands out of other people's affairs. She has called upon you—for a purpose of course. She has advised you to quit San Satano."

"She did not hint at such a thing," answered Meda, who had waited impatiently for Colonel Centipede to conclude.

"What then?"

"She talked of other matters."

"Oh! she tried to poison your mind against me, did she?"

"Your name was not mentioned," smiled the girl.

The Arizona nabob looked puzzled.

"Keep your word with me," Meda went on. "I owe much to you because you brought me in from the desert. You said I should not live always here. I think it time for me to go away. I ask you to keep your word, Colonel Centipede."

"To take you away, eh?"

"No, to say that I am at liberty to go."

"I say nothing of the kind—not now at least," he replied. "I want to fight out this battle with her first. I want to show this viper that I have a heel that can crush her head. Day after to-morrow you will not want to desert the camp. There will be another turn of the screw before that time. Somebody has been sent for—somebody will come. The woman of the desert will wish she had never spun the web she gloats over now!"

He left his chair and stood before her, his splendid figure and handsome face strikingly revealed by the sunlight that streamed into the room.

While Meda surveyed him she may have thought of some things Cactus Clara had told her, for her delicate skin changed color several times.

"She may have told you a good deal about me!" he suddenly exclaimed. "She professes to know much more than she holds. I don't ask you to repeat because I am in no humor to listen to the falsehoods of this desert curse. I am Colonel Centipede, able to hold his own against all his foes. No woman can push me to the wall though this one may put me on the offensive. I have nothing to defend! She everything. Let her beware beneath whose armor she shoots her shafts!"

Colonel Centipede walked to a desk partly set in the wall and unlocked it.

Taking from it a small leathern pocketbook he came back to Meda and opened the object.

"A woman with rage, vengeance and jealousy struggling for the mastery in her heart will attempt to clothe a lie in the garb of truth," he continued. "Here is a bit of paper. You see it has some age, Meda. It is a reward for an escaped prisoner. Look at it, and tell me whether she did not speak the name of the hunted convict in your presence this morning."

The waif of the desert took the piece of paper which the nabob extended and looked at it a moment.

All at once she started and grew pale.

"You need not answer," said Colonel Centipede. "She did not mention my name. Oh, no! But all the same, poison came from her fangs and fell where it was expected. How clever this woman is! How kindly she spares my feelings. She disdains to speak ill of me to you, Meda, yet she tells you that Marked Monte, an escaped California convict, is setting a snare for you! There! don't let your blushes betray you, girl. You see that Colonel Centipede knows the arts of the plotter as she knows them herself!"

He took back the paper, and restored it to the

pocketbook, which he threw across the room into the open desk.

"You can't quit San Satano now," he said, turning to Meda again. "I want you to see the wind-up of the battle and the victory, my victory. Marked Monte am I? Do I look like the man described in the advertisement you have just read? If I were the convict, would I play nabob here? Wouldn't I have put an ocean between me and this continent years ago? Oh, the deep-laid schemes of this desert siren! Because she can't weave a web strong enough to hold Centipede of Arizona, she threatens to destroy him! Meda, my child, the woman and her lie will go out together! Go back and bide your time!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

TORN FROM THE SAND.

It was true, as Meda had told Colonel Centipede that the new proprietor of Captain Goshen's mine—Blonde Burt—had returned.

When she reached her little house with the vines above the door, she found the handsome sport awaiting her.

"I did not stay long," he began, with a smile. "It did not take me a great while to find out something."

In an instant the girl recalled their last interview and Blonde Burt's resolve to solve the mystery that enveloped her life.

"I went to the spot where Colonel Centipede found you in the desert," he resumed, speaking the name of his rival in derisive voice.

"How did you find it, Captain Burt?"

"It was something of an accident—accidental good luck," he smiled in return.

"When Colonel Centipede showed me the spot several years ago, I marked it in a peculiar manner, but for all this it was by the merest chance that I rediscovered it."

Meda was listening to Blonde Burt with breathless interest.

"The sand hides a good many things, Meda," he proceeded, hiding one hand in his bosom. "It hid this."

The following moment he drew forth and displayed to the girl's gaze a gold locket, whose outer case bore evidences of having been buried a long time.

She took it with eagerness and curiosity, and the sport drew back and watched her with a smile.

"You don't recognize it?" he asked, at length.

Meda slowly shook her head.

"It does not bring the past back to you?"

"No."

Blonde Burt looked disappointed.

"I had hoped it would be the means of restoring the missing links of the chain of memory," said he. "When I unearthed the locket, on the exact spot where the desert tragedy took place, I thought I had given the past back to you."

"Open it," replied the girl, whose fingers had not proved equal to the task.

The blonde sport took the locket, and after several trials opened it for the waif of San Satano.

"You see," said he, "that time has nearly effaced the pictures within. One can see the outlines of two faces—one, that of a handsome woman: the beauty of the eyes still remains—and the other that of a child."

"I see," murmured Meda, gazing at the shadow portraits before her. "Do you think I am looking at my own portrait and my mother's?"

"Undoubtedly!" exclaimed Blonde Burt, promptly. "Although the outlines of the child's face—shadow outlines, we may call them—are all that remain, I seem to trace in them a resemblance to your own Meda. I am convinced that I have found your own picture and your mother's."

Meda looked again with redoubled scrutiny. It seemed to her that she had reached the last door of the mystery, only to find it closed and barred against her.

"There is no inscription in the locket," remarked Blonde Burt, who did not tire of watching her. "It cannot have been a present."

"I see none," answered Meda, regretfully.

"I am no nearer the truth than before."

"I shall try again," responded the sport.

"This only encourages me. There is no mystery past finding out. To-morrow I shall go out again—this time not to be stopped by a peg in the sand. My trail may take me back to the coast or to the banks of the Missouri."

"Why all this for a waif like me, Captain Burt?" exclaimed the girl, taking a step toward him. "I can never reward you."

Their eyes met at that moment, and the colonel's rival took one of Meda's hands.

"Don't say that, girl," cried he. "I'm not as black as I'm painted," and he laughed in her face until she blushed. "You can't reward me, eh? You think so now; but we will wait until the game is out, or, in other words, until I come to you with the secret of your life on my lips."

For a little while she let him hold her hand, then gently withdrawing it, she laid her fingers softly on his arm.

"If you expect love, Captain Burt, I must disappoint you now," she answered, with a

firmness so gently uttered that none could take offense. "If in return for the secret of my life I am expected to give you my heart you will find me without a heart to bestow."

Blonde Burt retreated, with color deserting his face. His lips twitched, and for the briefest moment a flash of resentment lit up his eyes.

Meda's arrow had gone unerringly to the center of the target.

"No heart to give me," he exclaimed, smiling suddenly. "Not if I should restore you to your mother?"

"Not even then."

"Oh, I see! I am too late. The man with the iron hand—the cool plotter and double-skinned nabob of Arizona stands between us!"

There was bitterness in every word that fell from the blonde sport's tongue.

"No, not Colonel Centipede," rejoined Meda, who rightly interpreted the hot words just spoken.

Blonde Burt looked confused.

"Then I can bear my defeat with better grace," was his reply. "I thought that perhaps the bonanza wolf who came along when the desert wolves had left you had played his love cards all too successfully. Not Colonel Centipede, girl! Then, by heavens! I think more of you than ever!"

"I shall be fair with you, Captain Burt. You would ask me to tell who has the heart I could not give you in return for the greatest service—"

"No, no! Keep the secret!" broke in the sport, putting up his hand in remonstrance.

"He would be my bitter enemy if his name was Centipede. As it stands, he is my friend and I am his! Keep the locket, Meda. It is the first link in the chain—a link from the sand. A study of the dim portraits may by degrees bring back the past. Some exciting scenes have taken place in camp since I went away. What has become of the Indian—and the boy?"

"They are not to be found," answered Meda evasively.

"So Big Felix has explained. He says that you declare the Indian innocent."

"I do."

"Then—"

Blonde Burt checked himself as if he had caught the slight start made by the girl.

"Ah! another secret, Meda?" he quickly continued. "Keep it. Don't let me draw you back into the affair which resulted in Grimshaw's death. We will find the murderer by and by. Time and good hunting makes all things even. And mind you don't let anybody rob you of any of your secrets. I am now the bonanza rival of this man with two lives—the darkest one of which lies behind him. I have served Colonel Centipede; but the moment I saw that the web he was weaving was for you, I said to myself: 'No! If I can win Meda from you, colonel, it shall be done. If I cannot, then the truth shall come between her and your last hand.'"

Meda found herself alone almost before the echo of the last word had died away.

Blonde Burt had walked from the house with the same tread that distinguished him in the hour of his triumph.

"If I have lost, you haven't won, Colonel Centipede!" he murmured. "When I engaged the boy to keep the records of the mine I suspected that Cupid had already been at work and I thought I would keep him under my eye. It turned out just that way, and since it has, though, I am the loser, it shall be no other way, I don't care how many trumps other hands than mine may hold! Meda shall have two friends—her lover and me!"

The blonde sport went straight to his quarters.

As he closed the door he beheld a folded note on the table and in another moment it was in his hand.

"Will Captain Burt come to the private-office in the 'Heathen Chinese?'" he read. "The writer will meet him there, and important business will be talked if he is in the right humor for it."

"I will go," said the colonel's rival at the close of the note. "The handwriting is not wholly unknown to me. My men are not at work and the mine office is under the present circumstances the best place for the interview."

Ten minutes afterward the blonde sport of Arizona walked into the mouth of his last acquisition and thence into the private office near the first chamber.

He found the place occupied.

"You come back unannounced, Captain Burt," spoke the person who rose at his entrance, "you leave one's company without ceremony, too. But I did not send for you to say this."

The speaker was Cactus Clara.

"You have not been long back, but long enough, I presume, to have heard what has happened."

Blonde Burt bowed.

"I have seen Felix," he replied.

"The very man who knows the most!" and the woman smiled. "What did you discover on your mission?"

"My mission?"

"Yes—the one that was expected to reap results concerning Meda's history."

"Oh," cried Blonde Burt. "I did not find much."

"But something, eh?"

"Yes, a locket."

In a second the Queen of the Desert had turned white even to the hands at her sides.

"Where did you find it?" she asked.

"Where Colonel Centipede found Meda."

"Let me see it, will you?" and Cactus Clara held out her hand.

"I did not bring it with me," returned Blonde Burt. "She appeared anxious to retain it—"

"She?—Meda?"

"Meda."

"What did she say when she saw the find?"

"It was a surprise—a rather startling one, but it did not throw any light upon the mystery."

"It did not, you say?" cried the Desert Queen.

"The two faces in the locket were too dim—mere outlines of what they were once."

A strange, fierce look of triumph burned up in Clara's eyes. She stood like a statue for a moment in front of the blonde sport, then throwing her hands dramatically toward heaven, she exclaimed:

"Merciful God, I have no cause to thank Thee for much, but I do for this! Let the past be dark and the future bright, and keep from the wail of the sands the secret they have kept till now!"

She dropped her hands, and with a groan staggered against the wall, then, in another moment, fell to the floor like one dead!

Blonde Burt looked at the spectacle amazed.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CLARA AND THE MYSTERY.

SOME few minutes elapsed before Cactus Clara came out of her sudden swoon.

For a moment, with scarcely a vestige of color on her face, she looked wildly around, then when she saw the blondesport, who was quietly watching her, she gave a quick start, and put out her hand.

"What did I say just before I swooned?" asked she, with an anxious smile at her lips. "Do not be afraid to answer me in full, Captain Burt."

The owner of the rival bonanza repeated as nearly as he could her pathetic appeal to Heaven.

"Ah! did I say that?" exclaimed the Queen of the Desert. "I could not help it, Captain Burt; but let us forget it. I did not send for you to witness a scene like that one. I have something important to say."

"I am ready to listen," replied Blonde Burt. "Are you strong enough to go on?"

"Ay, strong enough to go to the end of the game, which I feel is near at hand. You know about the murder and the mob? They lost their red victim by a respite just when they were about to take vengeance for Grimshaw's death. The Indian is supposed to have decamped, the boy, young Louis, likewise. Now, I am going to enlighten you. Do you know that the Indian called Red Arrow is Silk Hand, the Mohave detective, and the man I have sought for years in the interests of Colonel Centipede the ingrate?"

"I have guessed that since coming back," smiled Blonde Burt.

"Silk Hand," continued Cactus Clara, "was marked by Colonel Centipede from the moment that Vallert's sharp eyes discovered his identity. He resolved to strike Louis through the Mohave, thus, as he has expressed it with that cold laugh of his, bringing down two birds with one stone. Grimshaw was killed. In his hand, as they have doubtless told you, was found a note warning him against the Indian. Have you seen that note?"

"No."

"It is here," answered the woman, taking a folded paper from her bosom and handing it to Blonde Burt. "You can look at it while I go on."

The blonde sport unfolded the paper and leaned toward the lamp fixed in the wall.

"As a matter of course that note found in Grimshaw's hand was enough to seal the Indian's doom," resumed Cactus Clara. "Can't you read between the lines, Captain Burt? The 'warning' is cleverly worded and nearly anybody but suspicious, Indian-hating Grimshaw would have seen the true meaning of the sentences. The compromise, backed up by Louis's offer of himself as Silk Hand's security, saved the red prisoner from the mob. A short time afterward four men whom I can name pounced upon an Indian among the shadows of the town and nearly smothered him with a poncho. He was hustled away with proper swiftness, and when he came to his senses he was in a dark, underground dungeon from which there was not the slightest sign of exit."

Blonde Burt at this nodded as if he understood the play just mentioned.

"The slaves of their master made a singular blunder," Cactus Clara proceeded, after a short pause. "In brief, Captain Burt, they caught the wrong Indian."

"The wrong Indian?" echoed the Arizona sport.

"Yes. There is not much difference between

my spy, Red Pablo, and Silk Hand, the Southwest ferret. The orders from headquarters were to catch the trailing Mohave and shut him up in the mine dungeon, not to keep him from the Grimshaw court so much as to secure two victims."

"I see!" exclaimed Blonde Burt. "What a clever and merciless man he is."

"He was always that, though more merciless than clever, perhaps," answered the Desert Queen. "Of course he would want to throttle Silk Hand. The Indian has been on a long trail. He has picked up link after link until the chain is nearly complete. He has eluded me and given me any amount of trouble as you know. I have stood for years between Silk Hand and Colonel Centipede, but I stand thus no longer."

The speaker's lips met resolutely behind her last word.

"I have just cut Juarez, the One-Eyed, to the bone. It was the cancelation of an old debt. The man whose life I saved deserted me when I had the fever and was near death. I wouldn't kill him for the world, the rope will do that one of these days. In spite of my anger, I pitied the abject treacherous wretch while I whipped him at the hotel. He is not quite as bad as his master, and to think that I have risked my life for both. Juarez is now off on a mission for Colonel Centipede. The yellow man has gone south across the desert."

"After some one?" queried Blonde Burt.

"Yes. The king of the mines is about to play his last trump. He is desperate. He sees that I am now in his path, and well he knows that while I am there he can never win the wail of the desert. Captain Burt, I am willing that Juarez shall bring back with him the man who will read his message. He sent Juarez because he has not Jason, his regular messenger, at his command."

Blonde Burt smiled.

"Jason will never come back," said the sport. "On his last errand he was stopped and robbed of his dispatches."

"Robbed, Captain Burt?"

"He was robbed. The message he bore was to yourself, Cactus Clara. Colonel Centipede sent for you to come and help him play his pet schemes out."

"Then you need not tell me who robbed Jason the messenger," cried the Queen of the Desert, at which the blonde sport broke into a light laugh.

"Now," continued the woman, "I shall show Colonel Centipede that I am not in the snare as completely as he thinks. The dungeon in the mine no longer holds a man with a red skin; but it has a tenant all the same. That tenant is where he should be at this hour, and the master holds the key that keeps out of the way his faithful slave. I have sent for you to say what I have said. When the Indian throws his last cards, I will not put forth a hand to ward off the blow. I may be here, or the desert may receive me as it has done a thousand times. Hunted for years from the mountain camp of Shasta Land to the mines of San Satano, behold the man of two names! And yet with all the fiery passion of my heart I have loved him! Captain Burt, you can never fathom the depths of a woman's heart. You don't know how it can cling to a monster through thick and thin, as mine has clung to the man called Colonel Centipede. There have been times when I would have gone through fire at his beck. It was the woman who stands before you who covered his trail when the oath-bound band of avengers were on it. And he has given me—what? A laugh for my devotion, a sneer for my love. The past is dead, Captain Burt. It is now war to the knife."

The blonde sport of San Satano saw the deep flush that mounted to the speaker's temples, and then receded, leaving them throbbing and pale.

"Not a movement until Juarez comes back," she resumed. "He may bring some one with him."

"Do you think so?"

"He may, I have said. We will wait."

"But the Indian? He may throw his noose."

"I will attend to that."

Five minutes afterward, Blonde Burt was again on the Plaza of the camp.

The Queen of the Desert came up out of the bonanza and entered one of the houses to the surprise of its occupant, a young girl.

"Captain Burt tells me that he found a locket in the desert," said Cactus Clara, with lips strangely pale.

Meda looked at her a moment without reply.

"He found such a bauble," she said at length.

"Can I see it?"

The colonel's *protegee* produced the locket, at which the woman snatched with eagerness, and Meda, drawing back, watched her intently, while she studied the shadowy faces on the inside.

Once or twice Cactus Clara's color came and went, her hands trembled, and there was a strange quaver on her lips.

"In Heaven's name, what agitates her so?" thought the young girl.

It was some minutes before the locket was returned, and then Clara seemed to part with it reluctantly.

"Did it supply any of the missing links of the chain of memory, Meda?" she asked.

"Alas, none," was the reply.

The woman's eyes seemed to say, "I am glad of that;" but her tongue spoke differently.

"You would like to know something about those portraits?" she inquired.

"I would like to know all about them."

"Yes, yes—a woman's curiosity, Meda."

"No, not that, Queen Clara. I want the past made clear. I want to know who I am. I was found in the desert, lashed to a wagon-wheel, and left by some one to the sun and the vultures. Captain Burt finds this locket where I was found. He brings it from the very spot, and when I open it, I behold two faces—one a lady's, the other a child's."

"What do you think, Meda?"

"What can I think, but one thing?" cried the girl.

"What is that?"

"Ah! can you not guess? I think I am the child pictured in the locket and that the other dim face is my mother's."

The locket lying in Cactus Clara's hand fell to the floor.

"That is a strange thought for you," she smiled though her face was white. "You ought to recollect whether you wore a locket then."

"I have told you that the past is a blank—a dark blank at that," rejoined the girl quickly. "Once or twice since Captain Burt gave me his prize, faces have floated before my eyes—faces unlike any to be seen in San Satano. Does this mean that by and by they will get form?—that one of these days I shall be able to see myself as I was then and my mother as she appeared—"

"No, Meda, you cannot hope for this," interrupted Cactus Clara. "After all, it may be best as it is. Your mother may not be the mother she may have been—"

"Don't say that of her!" cried the girl. "Let me think my mother an angel who is not responsible in any way for my misfortunes."

"God bless you then!" was the response, and for a moment Meda found herself in Cactus Clara's embrace, to be kissed once with long-pent passion, and then to be released and left alone!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A CURSE COMES HOME TO ROOST.

COLONEL CENTIPEDE was troubled over the absence of Vallert. His spy was unaccountably absent and he did not know what to make of it.

"Tell me what Blonde Burt says?" he inquired eagerly of the man who came to him at sundown.

"What he says? About what?"

"The death of Grimshaw for instance."

The miner laughed.

"Oh, Grimshaw's in the ground and the men are going back to the mine to-morrow."

"Don't they want any blood?"

"You wouldn't think so to hear 'em."

Colonel Centipede reflected for a moment.

He knew the men of San Satano nearly as well as they knew themselves. If they believed that Silk Hand had killed Grimshaw and that he had escaped by flight they would settle back to business at Blonde Burt's command and nurse their vengeance for a future time.

Men of Grimshaw's kind are soon forgotten by their associates. Life is held so cheaply in the wild Southwest that the dead are banished from memory almost as soon as the echoes of the death shot die away. If the guilty is found he is punished; if he escapes he is rarely hunted.

Centipede knew that such was the way with San Satano justice. Silk Hand would never be hunted down, for was he not an inmate of the dungeon in the mine, forever sealed up there like a mummy in its sarcophagus?

"I have nothing to do now but to wait for the major," thought the Arizonian nabob after his last caller's departure. "We will then show one of the nicest little hands ever seen here or elsewhere. Major Lasso won't refuse to come. He won't be able to resist the temptation to get even with the woman who will give him trouble as long as he knows that she is unleashed. Ha! ha! I rather surprised Juarez when I broke to him the relationship between Clara and the major. I have more surprises in store though not for him. Let me see. He will get to Wayback at such a time, and a swift horse will make the major my guest to-morrow night. Then, my Queen of the Desert, you will discover that the man you want to enmesh knows how to turn the tables on his enemies."

Colonel Centipede was in the midst of this self gratulation when he became aware that he was not alone.

A slight footfall had broken in upon his musings and turning in his chair he found himself face to face with an Indian!

There was no mistaking the dark face and the deep and glowing black eyes.

The nabob fell back and stared at the newcomer. He had either entered the house without noise or had been concealed in it and had just glided into his presence.

"You don't knock when you come," said Centipede in testy tones while he continued to look the red over from head to foot, then back again.

A single stride carried the Indian to the table. "Is the white man Colonel Centipede?" he asked.

"He's no one else," grinned the colonel. "What is it?"

"Does he want a man in his mine?"

"An Indian do you mean?"

"An Indian."

"No, we don't want Indians in my mine."

The red-skin drew his figure up as if to show the colonel his strength.

"I don't doubt your ability to cut out as much rock as the strongest man I've got, but I don't want you. In fact there's a prejudice existing here against your race, and the men might make it unpleasant for you if you should enter my employ."

This was equivalent to a dismissal but the Indian seemed to plant himself more firmly where he stood.

"Where are you from?" queried Colonel Centipede.

"Captain John has been everywhere," was the answer.

"Captain John, eh? But where do you belong?"

"The big West is Captain John's tramping ground."

"The deuce it is!" laughed Centipede. "You don't expect to get all over it do you?"

The Indian looked straight at the colonel without the sign of an answer.

"As I have said I can't employ you," pursued the nabob, his words another hint that Captain John's absence was more desirable than his company.

"Captain John has good ears, white colonel," returned the red with a slight expression of displeasure in his eyes. "He wants to talk to Colonel Centipede."

"Oh! want to talk with me, eh? On business, Captain John?"

"On business," promptly echoed the Indian.

"Very well, sail in!" and Colonel Centipede tilted his chair back and crossed his feet upon the table. "A rover like yourself, keen and observing as I think you are, ought to strike some rich leads now and then."

"Captain John keeps his eyes about him as well as his ears."

"That's something."

Then the colonel became silent hoping that the Indian would proceed with his business without further delay.

"The white man is rich, eh?" questioned Captain John, glancing at the appointments of the room and particularly at the iron safe with an ornamented door in one corner.

"I'm comfortably fixed," smiled Centipede. "Comfortably fixed," he repeated.

Captain John the red-skin came confidentially closer and placed one of his dark hands beneath his dirty shirt as he replied.

"Yes, white colonel, Captain John finds something as he goes over his ground. Now, what would the rich man of the mines give for this?"

The hand crept into the light, and Colonel Centipede saw that it held a bowie-knife whose six inches of good steel were slightly rusted.

The handle was ornamented with silver, and in such a way as to form two initials. In a moment Colonel Centipede saw only the knife in the Indian's hand.

"What would I give for that, Captain John?" he queried, reaching for the knife, which was not put forward to meet his fingers. "I'm not a prince of the bowie. You've come to the wrong man to sell a thing like that."

The Indian seemed to smile derisively, if Colonel Centipede could read faces well.

"The wrong man, white colonel?" he said. "Well, Captain John can sell the knife elsewhere in San Satano."

"Do you mean that you will do so if I don't come to your demands?"

"Captain John may."

A short silence succeeded the response. All the time Centipede eyed the knife.

"Where did you get it?" he questioned.

"Captain John found it where its last owner left it. It was not in the lands of the South, white colonel. The vulture does not sail the skies there like he does in Arizona. What will you give Captain John for the knife?"

Centipede, with his lips knit together, looked the Indian over again.

"Not a dollar, if I can get the knife otherwise!" he muttered. "I don't intend to fall into the hands of a blackmailing red-skin. By heavens! he has too much in his head for me—more than he has in his hands."

But Captain John, standing as he did boldly before Colonel Centipede, presented no vulnerable point. It would not do to spring up and dash straight at the Indian, especially as he held a bowie in his hand, and his eye told that he was quick and powerful.

"I can't purchase until I know what I'm getting," returned Centipede, looking wistfully toward the knife.

"The white colonel ought to know. The letters 'C. C.' are on the handle of the knife in the metal the pale-faces love so well. Does he say that he never before saw the blade in Captain John's hand?"

The nabob was silent.

"Oh, the knife will sell on the Plaza!" continued the red-skin, and the bowie dropped out of sight in the shirt. "Captain John thought the white colonel would buy his old knife back. Now if he will come out he will see Captain John sell it to the man who offers the most for it."

In an instant Colonel Centipede crimsoned to the roots of his hair.

"Will you carry out that threat?" he exclaimed, his feet dropping from the table at the same time and his body starting forward.

"The white colonel has ears like Captain John."

"Yes, so I have, and hands, too. I haven't said that the knife was ever mine. I don't say so now. You must not let your head get away with your tongue."

"Then," said the Indian, coolly, falling back, "then, the rich man refuses to buy?"

"Not without an examination."

Captain John seemed to change his mind.

His hand moved to his bosom once more and the knife again came forth.

A moment later it was placed on the table in such a manner that the point lay toward the colonel though the initials in silver were plainly visible in the handle.

At the same time the Indian stepped alongside with his body half interposed between Centipede and the bowie as if to prevent it from being snatched up by the nabob.

"There! the knife lies before the white colonel," spoke Captain John. "Let him look with all his eyes and then say if he wants it sold on the Plaza."

Like a hawk did the red-skin watch the man who bent slightly forward to inspect the knife.

Colonel Centipede thought rapidly while he looked.

"I can seize the handle in spite of the way he's placed it," ran through his brain. "Of course there's a risk in the catch. I'll have the Indian to fight; but I'm quick enough, I think. I used to be quick enough for the quickest."

All at once the left hand of Colonel Centipede darted at the knife with the silver handle, and equally as sudden a hand flew at his. At the same time they met on the table, and as the bowie was jerked up in the nabob's clutch, the Indian's fingers closed on his wrist like a steel manacle.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE INDIAN'S ENEMY.

THE nabob of Arizona, thus met by a man as good as himself, drew back, still holding the coveted blade and looking the Indian madly in the eye.

"The white colonel can buy the knife," cried Captain John. "He may be quick and strong, but he must not forget that the hand of the Indian is as swift as his own. The bowie found in the distant gold hills of the Shasta country—found where it was left after its last work, has come back to its owner. If he wants it he can buy it. He gets it no other way, no matter how strong he is."

Colonel Centipede was on the eve of breaking forth in mad imprecations, but the cool eye of Captain John probably deterred him.

He knew that he could not throw the Indian off, for the hand at his wrist seemed to sink to the bone, therefore he did the best thing that presented itself.

He dropped the knife, and it fell back upon the table with a ringing sound.

Captain John showed no signs of triumph. He merely released the colonel's wrist and moved the bowie to where it had lain, and then fell to watching it as before.

"What do you want for the accursed thing?" asked the Arizona Cresus.

"One thousand, white colonel."

"What! one thousand dollars for that nasty knife?" exclaimed Centipede. "I don't propose to be robbed."

"All right. Captain John won't push the bargain," and a red hand fell upon the bowie-handle, and in a twinkling it disappeared in the Indian's bosom.

"What are you going to do now?" queried Centipede, following this action with an observing eye.

"Ugh! find another market for knife mebbe."

"In this town?"

"Wherever Captain John can, colonel."

"See here," Colonel Centipede took a step toward the Indian. "It might be dangerous to offer that bowie for sale in San Satano."

"Why, white colonel?"

"They don't like Indians here, as I have told you."

A scornful smile appeared on the dark face that confronted the nabob.

"Captain John has always taken care of himself," said the red-skin quietly, but his very coolness was resolute emphasis itself. "He has been among white wolves before to-night. If the white colonel banters him, the knife will be offered on the Plaza as soon as the Indian can get there. Good-by."

Captain John backed to the door watched by the man whose look told that he would have

given one-half of the thousand if the Indian had walked off face foremost.

Suddenly a dark hand put backward found the latch, then a click and the door was open.

Colonel Centipede kept his place, a statue at the table, but his brain was at work. He let the Indian go much to the latter's disappointment as he thought he read by the red face, and in a moment the door closed and was alone.

"The scarlet scoundrel is as quick as a cat!" exclaimed he. "I thought I was agile, but, heavens! I can't cope with the Indian tramp in that direction. Will he carry out his threat? Will he attempt to sell the bowie on the Plaza or in the dens? I wouldn't give a dollar for it if she were not here. Cactus Clara would like to make it war to the knife and with that very blade, too. She knows its history. So did Silk Hand, the Mohave hunter, but he is out of the way. Wait! I forgot the other person who would like to have the blade. Blonde Burt is back. He will pay the Indian his price. Ay, before he would let the prize escape him he would double it."

His thoughts thus rapidly expressed took Colonel Centipede to the door and thence from the room.

The space before the house was clear, Captain John having already passed out of view.

"He can't escape me if I am quick," ejaculated Centipede, going back into the room for a moment. "I can find him before he carries his plan into execution. What in the name of wonder keeps Vallert from me now?"

Not many minutes elapsed before the nabob of Arizona was down on the shanty-lighted Plaza with his eyes on the lookout for Captain John, the red-skin tramp.

"By Jove! here you are!" suddenly exclaimed a voice at sound of which Centipede turned and saw Redlock before him.

Redlock, as the reader will recollect, was the leader of the four who mistook Clara's spy Red Pablo for Silk Hand and hurried him off to the dungeon in the mine.

"Redlock, I want you," replied the nabob. "There is a strange Indian in camp."

"And one in the mine, colonel."

Centipede gave his man a startled look.

"Never mind the one in the mine just now," said he. "I want—must have—Captain John the tramp."

"Then come with me," and Redlock turned toward the Double Daggers Hotel. "That Indian is just sampling Cute Costello's poison."

"Then I'll intrust you with a mission, Redlock."

"I'm in for anything."

"Find the Indian—the one who has just come. If he is willing to lose his senses among Costello's glasses, help him along. Don't quit him for a moment. When you have him in the proper condition, and can do so unobserved, relieve him of a knife which he carries in his bosom."

Redlock looked at Colonel Centipede with some amazement.

"It's a funny mission to come from you, colonel," said he, "but I never ask any questions you know."

The nabob smiled.

"If I should not succeed with this Captain John—if he stubbornly stays sober?"

"Send him to me with a whisper in his ear to the effect that I've reconsidered my decision. He'll understand it, Redlock."

"But you'd rather get the knife by the first process, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, especially if Captain John troubles me no more afterward."

"I'll do my best, and, to insure good work, I want to catch the Injun whar I left him—at Costello's bar."

Colonel Centipede watched his big slave for a moment, and then walked slowly back.

He saw Redlock step upon the porch of the hotel, and then the figure of the miner-sport vanished.

"Not smart enough for an Indian tramp, eh?" he muttered. "We shall see."

Meantime, Redlock, intent on his mission, had crossed the threshold of Cute Costello's place.

A strange Indian in San Satano, so soon after the exciting events in which another red-skin had taken part, was apt to create no little curiosity and speculation.

Redlock found him already an observed personage, as he shook his liquor in his glass, with a deeper and more pronounced glitter in his eyes.

It was evident to Colonel Centipede's man that Captain John was well on the road to intoxication, for he was enjoying the broad jokes and insinuations of the bar-room crowd with a half-drunken leer.

The tempter lost no time in pushing himself forward.

He told Costello with a knowing wink to set out his "best mountain dew" for Captain John, and when a new bottle was produced from the mysterious recesses somewhere beneath the counter a broad smile went from man to man.

Three times in rapid succession did Redlock's generosity supply Captain John from the new bottle. He saw the twinkle in the Indian's eyes

grow more and more bacchanal, and every now and then he stole hasty glances toward the resting place of the coveted blade.

At length the red tramp refused to drink another drop of Cute Costello's liquid poison.

Redlock interposed no particular urging for he was satisfied with his work and the crowd sent up a whoop and a laugh when it saw the two walk out of the hotel arm in arm.

Colonel Centipede's agent found the Indian nearly a dead weight on his arm.

He escorted him past his own cabin and down among the shadows that lay at the mouth of the nabob's bonanza.

Once or twice he thought of making a dash for the bowie but he restrained his eagerness and led his victim on.

All at once Captain John broke from Redlock's grasp and fell forward striking the ground with his face and rolling over to lie still in the dim light of the stars.

"I guess 'mountain dew' hasn't lost its powers!" laughed Redlock contemplating the work of the vile liquor dispensed at the Double Daggers. "The Injun will love his worst enemy till there are no Injuns to drink it. I wish the colonel could see this noble red man just now!" and as if he had suddenly remembered the knife he stepped toward Captain John and bent over him.

"In his bosom, the colonel said," mused Redlock. "It's very easy to get at for there's nothing but a shirt between us. Ho! ho! Captain John, you'll wake up very neatly despoiled."

His hands were about to touch the fallen Indian, indeed, his eager fingers had felt the dark rough shirt over the breast when the words; "There! that will do, thief!" rung in his ears.

In an instant Redlock fell back, at the same time throwing his hand to his pocket.

"Hands up!" he heard the same voice say and a figure darted forward and halted between him and the Indian. "If you attempt to draw or make another motion to rob the man on the ground I'll cut your face into strips as I did the yellow face of Juarez the One-Eyed!"

Redlock saw the uplifted whip clutched by the hand of the woman who stood before him. He knew her at sight.

"A play for the man of plots and names!" Cactus Clara went on. "Go back to the master who waits for you, Redlock, and say that the Queen of the Desert stands between him and the Indian he wants drugged and robbed. You can't have the prize he wants. If you advance, I give you the whip; if you go away I spare you face. Take your choice."

Redlock gave the woman a mad curse, and went back.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

TOLD OVER A BOWIE.

"BAFFLED you, did she? Beat you off with the whip that spoiled Juarez's beauty, eh? You are not an Apollo, Redlock, but I appreciate the situation."

The man who stood before Colonel Centipede and heard him speak thus answered with a grim smile.

For ten minutes the nabob of San Satano had fumed like a madman.

"Which way did she go?" he suddenly asked.

"I did not stay to see."

"No—thought the lash might follow you up! I see. She may not know anything about the knife in the Indian's possession. Stay! we won't look for it where you left it, Redlock. It is in Cactus Clara's hands. Where is Vallert?"

Redlock was compelled to shake his head.

"I promised myself to keep quiet until Major Lasso comes," he murmured. "It can't be long now. If the getting of the knife is a victory for the desert viper, it won't last long. I know to what uses she intends to put the blade. What infernal fate brought Captain John to camp at this juncture? And how did he know the knife was ever mine? There is a cool, deep play under all this, and I see a familiar hand in it, besides."

Redlock, waiting quietly for orders, was allowed to depart without any. There were no more Indians to be drugged and robbed, and since Cactus Clara was abroad with her whip, it was apparent that Redlock wanted no more such commissions.

If Colonel Centipede or his agent had gone down into the depths of the Arizona Queen, past the iron door beyond which languished the dungeon's last prisoner, they might have seen a man leaning against a stone wall, and directly underneath a light fixed to the stone by an iron staple.

This person had a dark, smooth face, and was turning something over and over in his hands.

Every now and then the object thus manipulated emitted a momentary gleam as the light fell upon it from above, or when the man held it near the lamp for closer inspection.

"It is the same knife," said he, addressing himself. "The initials in silver have been worn a little, but they are the same—like the blade. Captain John, the Indian tramp, was very clever to bring the knife to camp. Tried to sell it, did he, and offered it to its former owner for one thousand, but Colonel Centipede thought to get

it cheaper. Ha! a man worth a million haggles over a thousand, and for an object like this."

The speaker was an Indian himself.

He continued to turn the knife over and over, until he suddenly stopped, and throwing up one of his hands, placed it before the lamp, thus throwing a shadow—the shadow of his own hand—down a corridor, where the light had fallen a moment before.

His quick ears had caught a sound. Somebody was coming, though the footfalls would not have been heard by many.

"You need not be afraid," said a voice in the shadow made by the Indian's hand. "I am a friend, Red Arrow."

The Indian seemed to smile at the name the unseen had spoken, and then he removed his hand from before the light, and looked down the passage.

In another moment the figure of a white man came in view.

"Ho! it is you, is it?" exclaimed the Indian, and then Blonde Burt came forward through the light, and looked down at his hand.

"What do you make out? I see you have the knife there," the blonde sport observed.

"Yes," and the Indian held the bowie up in full view. "It is the same, Captain Burt."

"The same? What do you mean, Red Arrow?"

"Ten years ago this knife belonged to a man who had two names, as he has three now," was the reply. "You will see the letters 'C. C.' on the handle."

"I see them."

"They don't stand for 'Colonel Centipede,' for then he did not bear that name. The letters mean 'Claude Cardiff,' which was once the name of the man who owns this mine. Where did Captain John find the knife? In the Shasta country—in the wildest portion of it at that too."

Silk Hand paused as if to examine the blade again and then looking up suddenly went on:

"Captain Burt, Meda has told me about the locket. See, I have it here," the Indian took the locket from his pocket and turned it over in his hand. "What a long trail I have had. It began in reality under the walls of the prison in California. It has twisted in an out, back and forth, all over the wild Southwest, like the track of a serpent or the trail of a fox that doubles. Ten years ago I promised a man who is dead now to see a great wrong righted and the guilty punished. Gideon Gaylor unfolded to me then in the wildness of the Shasta country the story of an infamous crime. He told me of a man who, as Marked Monte, slew an old hermit, how the murderer was caught and escaping the rope by the skin of his teeth went to prison. By and by he escaped, when a number of men avengers of the hermit undertook to do what the law—the white man's law—had failed to accomplish. They found Marked Monte's trail only to die upon it one by one—the last man I found myself, with his name written in the sand by his own fingers in the agonies of death."

"Marked Monte had only changed his name, Captain Burt. He had put on other clothes, but he was the same man who had taken the hermit's life. In hunting for him I crossed another trail and still another. I found the woman who had opened two prison doors at once though they were hundreds of miles apart. She freed Marked Monte in California and Pablo Paquina in Mexico. Those two men had a bond of union between them. Once, when one of the last of the avengers of the old hermit had come upon his prey, this Paquina, who had known Marked Monte before, saved his life and held the trailer for the assassin's knife."

"What a trailer you have been!" exclaimed Blonde Burt. "It is a wonder that it took you all these years."

"Ah! the twistings of the trail!" cried the Indian in reply. "I wanted every link that belonged to the chain! Here is another. Nearly six years ago a man and a little girl set out from California for Mexico. It was a long journey, through the mountains and over the hot sun-scorched plains of the South. They had a wagon and good horses. The child was a waif—that is, she did not know who her parents were. The couple traveled week after week, until they reached the heart of a desert. There the journey ended. The hot sands seemed to engulf the pair, and one day the vultures swooping down upon a quarry in the sun found a dead man and several horses. Captain Burt, I had to track the wagon besides looking for Marked Monte. I had to follow the two emigrants over mountain and sand. It was a terrible task."

"But you did not fail!" exclaimed the blonde sport.

"Fail?" echoed the Indian, his eye flashing proudly as he drew his figure up to its true height. "I could not fail. There was an oath registered against failure by the white man's and the red man's God. I found the trail of the two travelers. I followed it to the point where the wagon ceased to travel. I left the man there dead in the sand, but the child I trailed to her new home."

"You need not speak her name, Red Arrow," said Blonde Burt. "I will do that for you. The child is Meda."

"The white man is right," continued the Indian detective. "The little girl who traveled with the man toward Mexico is the queen of San Satano. Colonel Centipede found her lashed to the wheel of a half-burned wagon. He brought her to camp and since then she has been his protegee, knowing nothing of her past beyond the time of the rescue in the desert."

Silk Hand's voice seemed to have changed in tone.

His eyes went back to the knife again and he twirled it several times in his hands before he resumed.

"Cactus Clara brought me this blade," said he. "It is strange that the woman who has tracked me for years, only to be baffled, should do this. Love has turned to hatred, Captain Burt. The hand that released Marked Monte turns against him. She came to me with this knife and placed it in my hand saying:

"Here is one of the missing links. Here is Marked Monte's knife, found by Captain John an Indian in the Shasta country. Give me until to-morrow night to show Colonel Centipede that the viper, as he calls me, can sting while it is being crushed, then Silk Hand, I will give up the fight.' Thus Cactus Clara talked while I held this link in my hand, looking at it with my eyes in a blaze, as I felt. What did she mean, Captain Burt? I see the question in your eyes. Wait! The trail of ten years is near an end. The birds have flocked to doom among the deserts of Arizona, but I would for the sake of one person withhold my hand."

"For Meda's sake, Silk Hand?"

"Yes," answered the Indian. "But my oath comes between me and mercy whenever I think of it. I see a woman turn vulture. I find a whip and a dagger on my trail year after year, baffling me when I looked for success. But that is not all."

The Indian stepped from the wall and laid his hands on Blonde Burt's shoulders.

For a moment he looked the sport squarely in the face, then he bent forward and his lips moved at Blonde Burt's ear.

"My God!" cried the colonel's rival, falling back. "If that is true, Silk Hand, may the vengeance of Heaven strike you dead if you spare her a moment. She is the guiltiest of the three."

There was no reply. The Indian looked at Blonde Burt a minute longer, then he quietly put the silver-mounted bowie away in his bosom and went back to his wall with folded arms.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE INDIAN CLOSES IN.

BLONDE BURT and Silk Hand remained awhile longer in the underground chamber when the lamp was extinguished and footfalls went away in the darkness.

The following day two horsemen rode into San Satano from the south.

One was a handsome man of forty-five with fine observing eyes beneath the broad Mexicanish brim of the hat he wore, the other was dwarfish in figure and had a face curiously stripped with bits of adhesive plaster.

Juarez and Major Lasso.

They rode straight to Colonel Centipede's house and with an exclamation of delight the Arizona nabob seized the major's hand and welcomed him with a face beaming with satisfaction.

"I was fearful you would not come!" cried the colonel.

"Oh, it is a final chance to get even, you see."

"Yes, yes, I thought of that, too."

"Where is she?"

Major Lasso clothed the question in a good deal of eagerness.

"At the Double Daggers or at least she was there late last night," was the reply.

"So she threatens you?"

Colonel Centipede's face grew dark.

"You know her, major," he said evasively though he and the Croesus of Wayback were alone, Juarez having taken himself from the room. "She is playing a game of her own. By Jovel the spider attempted to catch me in her web, but when she discovered that I was not that sort of fly, she turns on me with all her hatred. A case of baffled passion, nothing more, major; but knowing her as you do I need not explain what baffled passion means when applied to her."

"Certainly not," answered Major Lasso with a twinkle in his eyes. "You want me to read the old indictment to her, do you?"

"Yes. Will you do it?"

The man from the South seemed to hesitate.

"I will," he said, slowly. "She ought to be arrested first."

"Arrested?"

"Yes—for murder."

"I see!" exclaimed Colonel Centipede.

"The young man has been missing a long time," Major Lasso went on. "If the body is in the state of preservation described by Juarez—"

"By Juarez?" broke in the San Satano nabob.

"By Juarez," proceeded the major, with a bow. "If it is thus preserved, I say, its production with the story I shall tell will finish the career of that woman. Juarez tells me that the body lies on its back in a cell in your mine so

wonderfully preserved as to be almost recognizable. The dead is her brother. He was taken away from Dos Lopedo by her at the close of a certain day—But you know the story, colonel, so I'll keep it for the court. If I could see it before she sees me—"

"The body, major?"

"The body."

Colonel Centipede leaned toward the man from the South with but little color in his face and his voice had sunk to a whisper when he spoke again.

"The cell lately got another tenant. I don't know about opening it," said he.

"An enemy whom you entrapped?"

"A dangerous Indian."

"How long has he been there?"

"Over forty-eight hours."

"Without food or drink in an almost airless chamber and amid Cimmerian darkness?"

"Yes."

"Then the chances are that he wouldn't come out if the door were open. I would like to see the preserved body, colonel. I knew the boy well, and identification is a good deal in the game we are playing. Can't we go down to the mine without creating a stir?"

"We can."

"Then to the mine before she arranges her trumps. Her trumps, ha, ha!" the speaker laughed. "She does not dream that I have come upon the scene—I, her once slave, husband, fool!"

Colonel Centipede led his guest down a by-way to the mouth of his bonanza. The two men entered and went down the corridor leading to the iron door in the stone.

"Didn't the boy leave no record of any kind?" whispered Major Lasso.

"He did, but somebody cut it out with mallet and chisel."

If Centipede could have seen the look on the face behind him, he might have started a little.

"Here we are!" he said, a few moments later, as he threw the light of his lantern upon the iron door before them. "You see what a dungeon I have here. Once inside, it means forever, unless the person who keeps the key concludes to shorten the captivity."

Major Lasso bent forward and curiously examined the ponderous door, then he drew back and caught sight of the key which Colonel Centipede had taken from his pocket.

"I shall open the door now," said Centipede. "The Indian tiger may have strength enough left for a dash."

"He won't get far," was the reply, as Major Lasso braced himself in front of the door. "Swing it open, colonel, and woe to the imprisoned fool who makes a jump for freedom!"

The key in Centipede's hand grated harshly in the lock—the unseen bolt shot back.

In a minute he had pulled the strong door open, and the beams of his lantern had fallen beyond the threshold.

"Where's your Indian?" laughed Major Lasso. "A house of straw would hold him, colonel."

The two men entered the dungeon.

"Here lies the boy," spoke Centipede, holding his light near the floor.

Major Lasso bent over the ghastly object revealed by the light, and looked at it several minutes in silence.

"What preserved the body in this manner?" he asked at length, looking up into Colonel Centipede's face.

"I don't know. Do you recognize him?"

"Not by the features. But the left hand tells the story. Look! A part of the middle finger is missing," and Major Lasso lifted the dark skeleton hand from the ground in proof of what he said.

"That will be evidence enough for the court," replied the Arizona nabob. "Now let us look at my Indian prisoner. Here he lies—on his face, exactly where he fell and gave up the fight."

Centipede handed his lantern to his companion, while he bent over the second body on the ground floor of the cell.

"Turn him over," said the major; "I'd like to have a look at his face."

The San Satano Croesus seized the body by the shoulders, and turned its face upward in the lantern light.

"Ho! what do you call this prison bird? An Indian, eh?" exclaimed Major Lasso. "By Jupiter, colonel, there's no red hawk's blood in his veins, and there never was any!"

The next instant Colonel Centipede snatched the light from the major's hands. Holding it close to the face on the ground he stared a moment at it and then fell back with a gasping cry.

"It is Vallert!—Vallert, my watch-dog!—my spy! As sure as life, we shut the Indian ferret up here."

"Then," answered Major Lasso, pointing at the dead with a grin, "then, by some strange process of change, he became a white man after the door was locked."

Colonel Centipede said nothing.

As if his eyes had deceived him, he was bending over the man on the floor, and the light of the lantern was again on the dead face.

"There is no mistake. It is Vallert!" exclaimed he. "Come! we must play swiftly and with precision now. Silk Hand is at large."

"Silk Hand?"

"The Indian who has been hunting me ten years! The Queen of the Desert may league with him, though she has tracked him like a bloodhound. I have kept the key to the dungeon all along. This mystery is too deep for me, and the dead before us won't talk. Back to the house, Major Lasso. The mine is ready. It must be sprung before the enemy concentrates."

A minute afterward the iron door swung back, the bolt growled in its place, and two figures rushed from the mine.

Colonel Centipede and his companion hastened back over the same unfrequented route.

"I will arm myself first, and then we will repair to the hotel and throw the thunderbolt card!" exclaimed Colonel Centipede, as he entered the house.

He led his guest straight to the little private room.

"A bit of nerve- tonic won't come amiss before we go," he was saying, as he opened the door.

The next instant he saw something move near the table, and as he fell against his friend, the major, his lips dropped apart, and he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"The time has come!" rung out a cold, stern voice from the middle of the room. "Major Lasso will go back to his own domain. I want only Marked Monte, or Colonel Centipede, the man of many crimes and many trails!"

The speaker was a tall and splendid-looking Indian.

Silk Hand!

CHAPTER XXXVIII. THE SKEIN RUN OUT.

THE two men stood aghast.

Major Lasso, from the South, looked at his companion, and marked the colorless face and the twitching lips.

"The Indian has the best of it," ran through his brain. "The grip of the red vise can't be loosened. I shall not imperil my life in the attempt."

Whereupon he walked out of the room, taking with him a muttered curse from Colonel Centipede, and the grated epithet, "Coward!"

"What do you want, now that you say the time has come?" asked the Arizonian nabob, turning to the Indian, whose hand had placed a silver-mounted bowie-knife upon the table.

"Does not the blade before you tell?" was the response. "Captain John was robbed after all, but not by the hand commissioned for that purpose. Claude Cardiff, or Marked Monte, by which name you are best known, the blade thrown away or lost in the Shasta country has come home like a curse."

"You were in league with the Indian!"

"With Captain John? No, colonel; the red tramp turned up unexpectedly, and the missing link narrowly escaped your hands to fall into Cactus Clara's."

"Then you robbed her, I presume?"

"She brought it to me."

"After she has hunted you from pillar to post? She wanted to give you a dagger as good as that one; but now she cringes at the feet of the man who will drag her to the noose for murder."

A smile appeared at the Indian's mouth.

He threw a quick glance toward the door behind him and struck the floor with his heel.

Colonel Centipede seemed to divine the signal for he fixed his eyes on the portal and saw it fly open.

"I thought so!" came out through his teeth as he caught sight of the strapping figure of Golden and beyond it the triumphant eyes of Blonde Burt. "A dozen men to hold one already in the net. Why didn't you fetch your other ally, Silk Hand—the woman with the whip?"

The next instant some one entered from the hall and Centipede heard the bitter laugh of the very woman he had named.

"You have him, I see!" she said to Silk Hand. "That is the right man—that is Marked Monte the hunted assassin of California. If you doubt it look between his shoulders and see the scar of the brand that marked him years ago before the authorities of the Golden State wanted him. You see how he eyes me, gentlemen. He is going to throw his venom now. Listen."

The Queen of the Desert folded her arms and waited with a cynical smile for Colonel Centipede to speak.

"Venom, is it?" he suddenly cried. "It may be that, but what I say is not a lie. If you men will go down into my bonanza, taking the first corridor to the right and following it, you will find an iron door set in the solid stone. The key I possess. There it is," and the iron key fell upon the table before the Indian ferret and his friends. "Open the door and go in," continued the nabob. "Bring out into the sunlight for the first time for years long lost Arthur Malabar. Carry him to the Plaza and let Judge Felix's jury pass sentence on the woman who decoyed him from Dos Lopedo to perish where he could not see the sun. And why? Could the dead lips speak they would say that their owner loved

a young girl in Sonora, that his sister hated her, that she brought him to my mine to die in the dark! His sister, men! The boy always believed that he was imprisoned because he knew a gold secret, but his last mutterings, heard through the iron keyhole, told that he died guessing the truth. The sister of the tenant of the dungeon is the viper that stings me. Helen Malabar, alias Cactus Clara—she has other names besides—is the angel who stands before you. The man who has just walked out—Major Lasso of Wayback City—was her last husband. Her only child—"

The sentence was not finished.

A wild cry had broken from the Desert Queen and in an instant she was at Colonel Centipede's throat, forcing him against the wall and stifling his attempts to go on.

Silk Hand sprang forward and caught the twain, wrenching them apart by main strength, and then holding them there.

The flushed and excited woman tried hard to renew the attack, but Blonde Burt led her away.

"The sentence will not be finished," said he in a whisper.

"Do you promise me this, Captain Burt?"

"I do."

"Then I am satisfied. You know the truth. Now let me go."

Colonel Centipede might have been seen two days later crossing the desert guarded by a group of horsemen, one of whom had the face and figure of an Indian.

With his hands tied behind him and lashed in the saddle, he rode along silent and sullen.

He looked sometimes at the Indian who rode ahead, and then at Blonde Burt with whom Silk Hand talked in low tones.

He thought, perhaps, of the career just closing, of the life of Marked Monte in a far-away region, of the death of the old hermit, of the secret killing of the men who had banded together for the purpose of running him down, of his connection with Cactus Clara and Juarez the One-Eyed, and of many other events.

He knew that Meda the waif would never fall into his power, that she would never know who her mother was unless she guessed it, for those who held the dread secret—Blonde Burt and Silk Hand—would never divulge it.

For behind this little troop moving over the plain the last act in the other part of the drama had just come to a close. Juarez, smarting under his wounds inflicted by Cactus Clara—had put his own useless self out of the way, and the Queen of the Desert, in flying from the mob of San Satano who wanted her for the killing of Grimshaw when she was as innocent of that crime as the babe unborn, had been thrown from her horse among the mountains and was dying alone.

"They won't drag me back to take my life for Colonel Centipede's crime!" she exclaimed, a wild, strange light dancing in her eyes. "They won't take me back to show me the beautiful young girl who is as pure as her mother is guilty. This is justice. Of the three who hold the secret one will soon perish in the noose and the other two will keep it for Meda's sake."

By and by the toughs of San Satano came up and found the Desert Queen with a proud, triumphant smile on her face, and when they stooped to lift her they saw that she was dead!

In due time Silk Hand came back to San Satano alone.

The noose had strangled the guilty!

This time no mob hemmed him in, for Meda had told her secret, and it was known that Colonel Centipede had killed Grimshaw for the purpose of getting his persistent trailer—the Indian detective—into the toils.

Silk Hand found Louis, the young record-keeper, at his post when he returned, and the youth was then told that his father was one of the men turned upon by Marked Monte the hunted convict, and that the old hermit was his grandfather.

After a while Meda of the desert became a young bride among the mountains of the border, and while Silk Hand and Blonde Burt stood side by side and watched the simple ceremony which made the lovers one, they prayed that no human lips would ever whisper to her that her mother was the cool, merciless and dreaded Cactus Clara.

Let us trust with them, reader, that their secret may be a secret forever.

THE END.

- 140 The Three Spaniards. By Geo. Walker.
- 141 Equinox Tom, the Bully of Bed Rock; or, Dan Brown's Masterstroke. By Jos. E. Badger, Jr.
- 143 Captain Crimson, the Man of the Iron Face; or, The Nemesis of the Plains. By Maj. Dangerfield Burr.
- 143 The Czar's Spy; or, The Nihilist League. By Col. T. H. Monstery.
- 144 The Hunchback of Notre-Dame. By Victor Hugo.
- 145 Pistol Pards; or, Soft Hand, the Silent Sport from Cinnabar. By Wm. R. Eyster.
- 146 The Doctor Detective; or, The Mystery of the Golden Coffin. By George Lemuel.
- 147 Gold Spur, the Gentleman from Texas; or, The Child of the Regiment. By Colonel Prentiss Ingraham.
- 148 One-Armed Alf, the Giant Hunter of the Great Lakes. By Oli Coomes.
- 149 The Border Rifles. By Gustave Aimard.
- 150 El Rubio Bravo, King of the Swordsmen; or, The Terrible Brothers of Tabasco. By Col. Thomas Hoyer Monstery.
- 151 The Freebooters. By Gustave Aimard.
- 152 Captain Ironnerve, the Counterfeiter Chief; or, The Gypsy Queen's Legacy. By Marmaduke Dey.
- 153 The White Scalper. By Gustave Aimard.
- 154 Joaquin, the Saddle King. By Jos. E. Badger.
- 155 The Corsair Queen; or, The Gypsies of the Sea. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
- 156 Velvet Face, the Border Bravo; or, Muriel, the Danite's Bride. By Maj. Dangerfield Burr.
- 157 Mourad, the Mameluke; or, The Three Swordmasters. By Col. Thomas H. Monstery.
- 158 The Doomed Dozen; or, Dolores, the Danite's Daughter. By Dr. Frank Powell.
- 159 Red Rudiger, the Archer; or, The Lady Bertha's Treachery. By Capt. F. Whittaker.
- 160 Soft Hand Sharp; or, The Man With the Sand. By Wm. R. Eyster.
- 161 The Wolves of New York; or, Joe Phenix's Great Man-Hunt. By A. W. Aiken.
- 162 The Mad Mariner; or, Dishonored and Disowned. By Colonel Prentiss Ingraham.
- 163 Ben Brion, the Trapper Captain; or, Redpath, the Avenger. By Dr. J. H. Robinson.
- 164 The King's Fool; or, The Knights of the Clashed Hands and Red Branch. By C. D. Clark.
- 165 Joaquin, the Terrible. By J. E. Badger, Jr.
- 166 Owlet, the Robber Prince; or, The Unknown Highwayman. By Septimus R. Urban.
- 167 The Man of Steel; or, The Masked Knight of the White Plume. By A. P. Morris.
- 168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot; or, Dagger Don's Double. By Colonel Prentiss Ingraham.
- 169 Corporal Cannon, the Man of Forty Duels. By Colonel Thomas Hoyer Monstery.
- 170 Sweet William, the Trapper Detective; or, The Chief of the Crimson Clan. By Joseph E. Badger, Jr.
- 171 Tiger Dick, the Man of the Iron Heart; or, The Dumb Bandit. By Philip S. Warne.
- 172 The Black Pirate; or, The Mystery of the Golden Fetters. By Colonel P. Ingraham.
- 173 California John, the Pacific Thoroughbred. By Albert W. Aiken.
- 174 The Phantom Knights. By Capt. F. Whittaker.
- 175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress. By Major Dangerfield Burr.
- 176 Lady Jaguar, the Robber Queen. By Captain Mark Wilton.
- 177 Don Diablo, the Planter-Corsair; or, The Rivals of the Sea. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
- 178 Dark Dashwood, the Desperate; or, The Child of the Sun. By Major Sam S. Hall.
- 179 Conrad, the Convict; or, Was He Guilty? By Prof. Stewart Gildersleeve, LL.D.
- 180 Old '49; or, The Amazon of Arizona. By Jos. E. Badger, Jr.
- 181 The Scarlet Schooner; or, The Nemesis of the Sea. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
- 182 Hands Up; or, The Knights of the Canyon. By Wm. R. Eyster.
- 183 Gilbert, the Guide; or, Lost in the Wilderness. By C. Dunning Clark.
- 184 The Ocean Vampire; or, The Heiress of Castle Curse. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
- 185 The Man Spider; or, The Beautiful Sphinx. By Anthony P. Morris.
- 186 The Black Bravo; or, The Tonkaway's Triumph. By Buckskin Sam.
- 187 The Death's Head Cuirassiers; or, Brave of All Braves. By Capt. Fred. Whittaker.
- 188 The Phantom Mazeppa; or, The Hyena of the Chaparrals. By Major Dangerfield Burr.
- 189 Wild Bill's Gold Trail; or, The Desperado Dozen. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
- 190 The Three Guardsmen. By Alexandre Dumas.
- 191 The Terrible Tonkaway; or, Old Rocky and His Pards. By Buckskin Sam.
- 192 The Lightning Sport; or, The Bad Man at Slaughter Bar. By W. R. Eyster.
- 193 The Man in Red; or, The Ghost of the Old Guard. By Capt. F. Whittaker.
- 194 Don Sombrero, the California Road Gent; or, The Three Men of Mount Tabor. By Capt. Mark Wilton.
- 195 The Lone Star Gambler; or, The Maid of the Magnolias. By Buckskin Sam.
- 196 La Marmoset, the Detective Queen; or, The Lost Heir of Morel. By Albert W. Aiken.
- 197 Revolver Rob, the Red-Handed; or, The Belle of Nugget Camp. By Jos. E. Badger, Jr.
- 198 The Skeleton Schooner; or, The Skimmer of the Sea. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
- 199 Diamond Dick, the Dandy from Denver. By Buckskin Sam.
- 200 The Rifle Rangers; or, Adventures in Southern Mexico. By Capt. Mayne Reid.
- 201 The Pirate of the Placers; or, Joaquin's Death Hunt. By Joseph E. Badger, Jr.
- 202 Cactus Jack, the Giant Guide; or, The Masked Robbers of Black Bend. By Capt. Mark Wilton.
- 203 The Double Detective; or, The Midnight Mystery. By Albert W. Aiken.
- 204 Big-Foot Wallace, the King of the Lariat; or, Wild Wolf, the Waco. By Buckskin Sam.
- 205 The Gambler Pirate; or, Bessie, the Lady of the Lagoon. By Col. Prentiss Ingraham.
- 206 One Eye, the Cannoneer; or, Marshal Ney's Last Legacy. By Capt. Fred. Whittaker.
- 207 Old Hard Head; or, Whirlwind and His Milk-White Mare. By Philip S. Warne.
- 208 The White Chief. By Capt. Mayne Reid.
- 209 Buck Farley, the Bonanza Prince; or, The Romance of Death Gulch. By Edward Willett.
- 210 Buccaneer Bess, the Lioness of the Sea; or, The Red Sea Trail. By Col. P. Ingraham.
- 211 Colonel Plunger; or, The Unknown Sport. By Capt. Frederick Whittaker.
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